

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to travel along one of the oldest trade routes, the Silk Road, on one of the boldest trade routes, the Karakoram Highway, from Islamabad, Pakistan, to Kashgar in Xinjiang, China, and from there on to Urumqi, the capital of the Autonomous Uigur Province of Xinjiang. The KKH portion of the trip was the most mesmerizing as it put my coin interests (Parthian, Bactrian, Indo-Parthian) in a physical context. I apologize for the long-windedness of the following account, but there was simply too much to tell.

– Gabriele Greenwald, November 2004

The Ultimate Road Trip

“The name of that mountain? Madam, we don’t give them names unless they are higher than 6,000 meters (ca.19,500 ft)”, our Pakistani guide Zafar instructed a member of our group. Though somewhat of an exaggeration, Zafar’s point was well taken. After three days into our Karakoram Highway (KKH) tour from Islamabad to Kashgar, most of us had a stiff neck from throwing our head back to gaze at the icy giants of the Hindukush, Himalaya, and Karakoram Ranges lining the Highway and the Indus River.

The KKH, a two-lane road blasted into the flanks of the world’s most awesome mountain chains, took two decades to build, and nature keeps it still a work in progress. In the 1960’s, the governments of China and Pakistan decided to resurrect a branch of the old Silk Road from Kashgar to Rawalpindi/Islamabad over the Khunjerab Pass, the Hunza Valley, Gilgit and Indus Kohistan. Over a thousand workers are said to have lost their lives to rock and mud avalanches, floods, extreme heat and cold, and hostile tribal interference. At any given time armies of Chinese and Pakistani maintenance workers stand by to clear this most unpredictable and magnificent of all roads which is closed completely between November 30 and April 30 of each year. Its 750 miles cut through a territory where the cultures, people, and languages of China, Pakistan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Tibet, and Afghanistan intersect. Some twenty ethnicities and a dozen languages, one of which (Burushaski) has no relationship with any other known tongue, are found along the KKH, and pockets of Buddhism and Hinduism are imbedded the major religion, Islam – which, predictably, is split into several directions: Sunni, Shia, and Ismaili Muslims are sometimes at each others throats.

Yet tourists no longer need to be escorted by armed guards as a Pakistani expatriate urgently suggested in Washington, D.C. Danger comes in the guise of sleepy truck drivers, falling rock, and sudden weather changes rather than from bandits. As it turned out, our Islamabad travel agent had picked the best two weeks for the journey. Our group of twelve Americans, Britons, and Pakistanis left a monsoon soaked Islamabad on July 12, had a clear road all the way, a smidgeon of snow on the 15,500 ft high Khunjerab Pass, and, at 100+ F, a couple of “cool” days on the edge of the Takla Makan Desert in Kashgar. All seasoned travelers, we had equipped ourselves for all sorts of eventualities, including emergency rations, but none of that was needed. Between us we had regional knowledge, useful languages like Urdu, Pashto, Farsi, and Mandarin Chinese, not counting the easy ones like Russian, Czech, German, and French, and still we needed the linguistic skills of our guides to make ourselves understood to many of the people we met, whose mountain isolation had just been partially lifted since the completion of the KKH in 1980.

Our first stop, just outside of Islamabad, was the ancient city of Taxila, erstwhile capital of the empire of Gandhara and well-known as a mint to coin collectors. It seems to have been on everybody's route, that of the Iranian Achaemenids, of Alexander the Great, by which time (326 BC) the Taxilans had acquired the good sense to surrender their city for the asking. Alexander's successors were driven out by the Indian Mauryans whose best known king, Ashoka, converted himself and the entire subcontinent to Buddhism. Coin hoards found in Taxila attest to its conquest by the Bactrians in the late 3rd cent. BC. They in turn were pushed out by the Indo Parthians who had to yield to king Maues and his Scythian marauders in the 1st cent. In more or less quick sequence Parthians appeared again, then the Kushans and the White Huns who, honoring their reputation, razed Taxila.

Fortunately, a great deal of archeological objects were found and assembled in the local museum, notably beautiful Buddhist friezes and a sizeable collection of Bactrian, Indo-Parthian and Indo-Scythian coins, as well as religious artifacts and household implements. The most stunning work of art is a statue of the fasting, totally emaciated Siddhartha, regrettably only as a copy in Taxila – the original having been claimed by the museum in Lahore. One can walk the town fragments of Sirkap and Sirsukh with their excavated stupas and streets, scramble up to the Dharmarajika stupa and visit the Jandial temple.

Islam in Pakistan and Chinese Turkistan seems to be much more relaxed than in Shiite Iran, for instance. The women in our group would carry a thin, colorful cotton shawl to cover head and shoulders when needed, as in a mosque. But no one objected to our wearing T-shirts and sandals without stockings, as long as we kept our legs covered. In the bazaars, unescorted women were not ignored or frowned on as in Iran. The only place we felt restricted was in Kohistan where even the most undaunted of our ladies would not take her morning walk alone. Local Pashtuns with their traditional saucer-like woolen caps looked like fierce Mujaheddin.

We picked up the actual KKH in a place called Havelian in the foothills of the Himalayans. It looks no wider than ten yards, just enough for two of those fantastically decorated Pakistani trucks to pass each other. A hundred miles further ahead, the road joins forces with the mighty Indus River not to leave its valley and those of its tributaries Gilgit, Hunza, and Khunjerab well into Xinjiang, China. If you looked hard enough you could make out a branch of the old Silk Road on the other river bank and imagine the prospect of enormous profits that made camel and donkey caravans undertake the suicidal journey along this mere footpath. Here, at the juncture of KKH and Indus near Thakot, a marker reminds the traveler that Alexander the Great had to turn his armies back in frustration after realizing the indomitable width and power of the river. When we saw it, the Indus was swollen with glacier water and raging along at a speed that would not permit the silt from the glaciers to settle. All along the Highway, the rivers appeared to carry liquid slate or molten lead, not water. We crossed the Indus on one of the many suspension bridges built by the Chinese and entered Kohistan.

Our guide, an ethnic Tajik from Gulmit, had no kind word for the Kohistanis. His mildest characterizations were: ungovernable, uncultivated, criminal, bellicose, and inhospitable – the latter being the worst one can call a fellow human being. Indeed, Kohistanis seem to have few friends. Well into the 1970's they are supposed to have sabotaged the construction of the KKH by attacking workers, stealing their equipment, denying food, and doing everything possible to keep the Pakistani government and the outside world at bay. A flourishing gun culture makes life difficult for Kohistanis among themselves, but we spotted no open display of firearms along the Highway. Almost every farm has a large manned watch tower to keep the neighbors out, according to our guide Zafar. They live mainly from animal husbandry, and let their women do the work while they go out and quarrel with each other, again according to Zafar. We noticed lots of small slivers of tilled field terraces, though, carved out of the more and more dramatic mountain landscape. The men looked morose, to be sure, and we saw very few women outdoors.

We spent our first KKH night in a PTDC motel in Besham, the best the place had to offer. One should not expect Western standards everywhere. A clean room, white sheets, a commode-type toilet are all you really need if you take off again at daybreak. We had as an added bonus the close-up view of the gushing Indus and a charming souvenir shop owner who told us we were the first American group he had seen in years. Before 9/11, up to 50,000 tourists annually would be on the Highway, now there is just a trickle of backpackers, cyclists, climbers, and hikers, not the free-spending package tourists. While he clearly seemed interested in the purchasing power of his clientele, as a former tour guide he also delighted in giving Americans sound advice (“Don't buy from that cheat in Gilgit. He's Indian and doesn't care about Pakistan”). In the – admittedly few – political conversations I had, such patriotism was rare. People seemed to feel a greater allegiance to their former Mirs than to the central government. These local princes ruled their lofty fiefdoms until the mid-seventies when they finally ceded official powers to Pakistan but centuries of tribal loyalties are not wiped out in a matter of decades.

Digital cameras proved to be an irresistible attraction to children. Even small Kohistani boys and girls dropped their reserve to get a look at their images on an LED screen. While boys are generally bold and will speak to strangers, girls are more difficult to draw out, and only in unsupervised situations would they dare test their English vocabulary. Taking pictures of women proved to be a challenge to one's deceptive skills. With few exceptions they would immediately disappear or avert their faces at the sight of a camera lens. Tajik and Kyrgyz women, however, do not seem to mind having their picture taken.

The roadside between Besham and Chilas is studded with boulders and rock faces bearing ancient petroglyphs and inscriptions in Sogdian, Kharoshthi, and Brahmi languages. Some of the animal and hunting scenes are said to date back as far as the second millennium BC. Once past Chilas, you get a closer look at the Nanga Parbat (26,650 ft, and still growing), or Killer Mountain, as the locals call it, and at the climbers' base camp, Fairy Meadows. Shortly before the Indus turns east and the KKH north to attach itself to the Gilgit River you reach an overlook where the three mountain ranges, Hindukush, Himalaya, and Karakoram, meet. It is difficult not to be impressed by the

majesty of the scenery. A little further ahead you can leave your bus to collect garnets at a rock avalanche next to the Highway.

The road between Besham and Gilgit is dramatic, to say the least. You find yourself closing your eyes with bated breath as your bus overtakes a slow truck right next to a 1000 ft gorge or seemingly scrapes against a mountain overhang, evading fallen rock. Your stomach gives notice when you cross suspension bridges over raging rivers or pass through a stretch of road cut out of ancient mud slides ready for further progress at any moment. Another gigantic mountain, the Rakaposhi (25,545 ft), becomes your beacon for the next couple of hundred miles, turning up in a different shape after every bend. When you reach the town of Gilgit your awe has exhausted you to a point where you are relieved to take a break from nature and plunge yourself into the mundane world of barter and bazaar. Located at the intersection of the Gilgit and Hunza Rivers and just beyond the turn-off to Skardu in Baltistan, the haven of hikers and mountaineers, Gilgit is a lively market town with excellent accommodation. The bazaar has a Chinese section where silk fabrics and Chinese artifacts are allegedly offered in barter trade, though everybody was happy to take our Rupees. Five languages are spoken here apart from the official Urdu: Shina, Khor, Burushaski, Balti (ancient Tibetan), and Wakhi (an Iranian language). Luckily, many also speak English.

North of Gilgit the Highway follows the Hunza River along the old Silk Road into the legendary Hunza Valley. Locals insist that the valley has an abundance of very old people, many of them centenarians. They attribute this to the Hunzakuts' healthy life style, the benefits of wild thyme tea, and plenty of apricots, the famous staple for man and beast in Hunza. We had two days here, headquartered in Karimabad in a spectacularly set hotel whose ratings oscillate between rave reviews and comparisons with Fawltly Towers. The valley is quite fertile, irrigated by a network of canals as the monsoon stops short of the mountains. It is too high to grow rice, so russet potatoes are planted, interspersed with tree-like cannabis. No one gets excited about this since all over Pakistan wild hemp thrives along the roads, even in Islamabad.

Hunza and the adjoining village of Nagar used to be Shia muslim, but now the inhabitants are mostly Ismailis whose spiritual leader is the Aga Khan. If you hear a muezzin the call to prayer will come from one of the few Shiite pockets on the other side of the river. Ismailis stand less on strict religious formalities: The curator of Baltit Fort hugged and kissed the ladies in our group at the end of a lovely dinner hosted by him – an unthinkable gesture in almost any other Islamic context, though his education in Germany may have contributed to this eruption of Western familiarity. The most visible signs of the Aga Khan's activities are the schools, colleges and health centers as well as irrigation and road construction projects sponsored by his foundation. They are part of a whole host of programs that stress self help and local initiative. On the whole, Hunza appears to thrive modestly despite the absence of volume tourism. We found its people to be very friendly, and walking at night was safe, at least between the fort and our hotel. One of our ladies was escorted to the hotel by locals after a very late session at the Internet café.

Worthwhile excursions from Karimabad go to the two forts, Baltit and Altit, and a jeep ride up to the Eagle's Nest, a scenic outlook with breathtaking views of Mount Rakaposhi and consorts at sunset. The Tibetan-style Baltit Fort used to be the stronghold of the Mirs of Hunza when its wooden structure was pronounced unsafe in 1960 and subsequently turned into a museum. The current Mir moved to a new palace down the road and continues to be an influential figure. The older Altit Fort is perched on a steep rock above the river, right on the remains of the Silk Road. Definitely the most rewarding tour is a walk along one of the irrigation channels. You see men and women go about their daily work, harvesting fruit, potatoes, and wheat or setting apricots out to dry on the roofs of mud brick houses and stables. If you are lucky someone digs up lumps of butter wrapped in tree bark that were kept in the soil for preservation, if you are unlucky, he will offer some to you. Women descend from the mountains with baskets full of wild thyme and other herbs. Kids, some of them with reddish hair and gray eyes, will engage you until you take their picture. You may see a wedding party careening along the narrow channel road in a little passenger Suzuki. I was invited onto a roof garden by some children who were eager to practice their English. In return they let me take photos of them and their home. At the end of our channel walk waited the Café de Hunza with real cappuccino – a treat after weeks of green tea.

All of us would have loved to spend more time in the Hunza Valley, but another day's driving was to get us to our next way station, Gulmit, past the Haldeikis Rocks with drawings of animals and inscriptions in Kharoshthi, Brahmi, and Tibetan. They are called the living diary of the ancient travelers, warriors, and pilgrims, evidently marking an important transit point. As the road ascended almost imperceptibly, driving conditions became more difficult. More and more sections of the tarmac were washed out by glacier water and left as rubble. Pakistani road crews would move rocks, fill holes, and dig ditches at a feverish pace. Chinese work camps began dotting the roadside. Their main task was to mend bridges damaged by the rampaging rivers or build new ones in better places.

Gulmit is not a remarkable place. The Hunza River there is about 350 ft wide at this time of year. It is spanned by a footbridge made of steel ropes and wooden planks inserted every yard or so. Only the most daring of our group took a few swaying steps above the roaring waters. Jagged mountains with shark tooth like tops (the Passu Cones) and huge mud and rock avalanches give the scenery an austere and even hostile character. Definitely worth visiting is the handicraft store well stocked with local textiles, silver jewelry, Kashmiri silk paintings, and an owner who will gladly take credit cards. Our hotel dinner was scheduled in the lobby as the dining room was booked for a group of women teachers who tried to crack the mystery of New Math – another project of the Aga Khan Foundation.

The Highway follows the Hunza River through the glacier territory around the village of Passu. Just south of it, the white Passu glacier stops short of the road. It is comparatively small in the summer, but as a reminder of its crushing force, the leftovers of a crumbled bridge remain. The new, better located bridge respects the glacier's older rights of way and has so far been left untroubled. A couple of miles beyond Passu looms the black

Bathura glacier. With a length of sixty miles, it is the one of the largest in the Karakoram. By comparison, the longest glacier in the Swiss Alps measures 10.5 miles. Rock slides, avalanches and other movements triggered by the changing glaciers have made life very difficult for the people between Gulmit and Sust. Periodically glaciers have dammed up the Hunza River and its tributaries and submerged everything in the ensuing lakes.

Before you reach the Khunjerab Pass (16,200 ft) you drive through the Khunjerab National Park. At its entrance, a sign promises untold pleasures spotting rare wildlife, such as the Marco Polo sheep, ibex, deer, wolves, and, perhaps, the elusive snow leopard. They all had the good sense, however, to stay away from the road. Since its opening not only trekkers and mountain enthusiasts have traveled the KKH but also well-heeled trophy hunters and poachers, and most of the celebrated wildlife now belongs on the endangered species list. We later saw snow leopard skins on the Sunday market in Kashgar, and unless they were fakes they were harvested illegally. All we could make out were yaks and hundreds of red-haired marmots bouncing along the wide valley of what was now the Khunjerab River. The Pass itself is breathtaking, in the true sense of the word. As you clamber out of the bus and stretch, admiring the border marker and the mountainscape around you, your knees buckle and your head goes woozy. It takes a couple of moments before you can stand upright again. It had started snowing.

The procedure at the Chinese checkpoint was relatively brief. Some of us could not resist a natural urge while waiting for the customs officer. All that needs saying is that the facilities at Pirali cannot be recommended, under any circumstances. We changed busses, drivers and guides and were assigned a young People's Army soldier to escort us through the restricted border area into Tashkurgan. Visitors are not permitted to stop there, take pictures, or have contact with any of the inhabitants. Our military chaperone was instantly charmed by our Mandarin speaker, an attractive young lady. He was very cheerful and chattered all the time except for one brief exercise of authority when he made our bus pull up alongside another tourist bus which had made an unauthorized stop by the roadside.

The border zone is mainly populated by ethnic Kyrgyz and Tajiks. It stands in stark contrast to the valleys on the other side of the border where you see schools, health facilities and shops. Here all we could see from the road were ugly and partly deserted housing projects. Half an hour later we reached Tashkurgan, our first overnight stop in Xinjiang, the autonomous Uigur republic. Uigurs are descendants of nomadic Turkic tribes who entered the region around the 12th cent. A.D. Sunni Muslims, they speak a Turkic language and write in Arabic script. China's recipe of dealing with this sometimes troublesome minority is to inundate it with ethnic Han (Chinese) settlers.

Tashkurgan, a Tajik town, is most memorable for the delicious flat bread sold in the main market street. The waft of Lysol greeting the visitor in the lobby of the Pamir Hotel, named for one of the three mountain ranges that hold Xinjiang like a horseshoe, immediately evokes memories of Socialist hospitality. So does the babushka in the hallway who presides over the cans of hot water for tea, the sullen, mostly absent staff, and the moldy rooms. But the Pamir is the only show in town, even attracting a merry

group of flaxen-haired youngsters to its front steps who turned out to be American students on a two-month program to study Mandarin, Uigur, and Tajik. In the hotel restaurant a very friendly Chinese waitress went out of her way to make our dinner a pleasant experience. She adamantly refused a gratuity as tipping is considered bourgeois in the People's Republic.

The highlight of our excursion into China was to be the old oasis city of Kashgar on the edge of the Takla Makan desert, the size of France and second largest in the world. As the hub of the ancient Silk Road, it was for centuries the passageway of goods, ideas and religions. Between 1870 and 1910 it was also a hotbed of Russian, British and Chinese imperial wrangling for the control of Central Asia, commonly known as The Great Game. On our way there, we planned to stop at the picturesque Lake Kara Kul but had to abandon the idea because of a snow storm. Muztagh Ata (24,500 ft) and Mt. Kongur (25,300 ft) had become invisible. An hour further along, at Lake Bulun Kul, snow turned into sleet, and we had to muster all our persuasive powers to make our guide stop at the Kyrgyz tombs and a couple of yurts by the roadside. No sooner had we done so, the yurts' door flaps flew open and women and children in beautiful Kyrgyz tribal dress piled out to offer their handicrafts.

We reached Kashgar on a Sunday afternoon, just in time for the legendary Sunday market where everything from camels to dentures, dried snakes, and digital TV sets is bought and sold by every conceivable Central Asian ethnicity. Families travel for days to get to market in Kashgar. Women put on their most festive dress for the occasion; some of them can be seen in gold brocade shawls over silk shifts and pants. This spectacle is supposed to be the largest of its kind in Central Asia. However, in my mind the daily market in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, is a close contender for that distinction. After some hours, the 100 F degree heat gets to even the most avid people watcher, and you long for a shower and cold drink in a comfortable hotel room. Our hotel, the Quinibagh International, turned out to be absolutely luxurious. Not only is it just a stone throw away from the disappearing OldTown, it also sits directly in front of the old British Consulate where George Macartney, one of the major players in the Great Game, was Her Majesty's eyes and ears for 29 years.

As we wandered the streets of the Old Town in the evening we could see the two main cultures, Uigur Turk and Han Chinese, clash. In some of the narrow unpaved streets, mud houses were razed and replaced with modern apartment buildings. Uigurs want to keep their life style, even if it does not include indoor plumbing and central heating. The dynamic, enterprising Han want to bring Kashgar into this century, as they did with Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. Here, the faithful are still called to prayer by the muezzin, not by a tape, and to make attendance possible for old people, there is at least one mosque on every block. Billboards between the ground and first floor of the mud brick buildings advertise the services of dentists, repair shops and jewelers. Over all of Old Town hovers the inescapable stench of burning mutton grease from the street barbecues. A donkey cart is pushed aside by a Citroen limousine. Witness the ubiquitous collision of tradition vs. progress.

We concluded the day with a cup of coffee at the Caravan Café near our hotel. It is run by an expatriate American whose Starbuck-like offerings have made him an attraction among Western tourists. He is also a tour operator with a tempting schedule. We put our heads together. There was little doubt in our minds: The next trip will take us to the lost cities of the Takla Makan Desert, like Khotan, Tun-huang, and Yarkand, where explorers of the caliber of Sven Hedin, Sir Aurel Stein, and Albert von Le Coq tried to save priceless libraries and artifacts – mostly by plundering them and carting them off to the museums of Europe.