

Adventure In Baltistan

If you're anything like me, you hold down a challenging, busy career role that you really enjoy, but you also believe that there ought to be more to life than just work. You shun mediocrity and believe it's good to follow a dream every now and then. But when it comes down to it, how can you actually afford the time to pursue dreams? Well, if your dream involves adventure in remote places, offering magnificent scenery, personal interaction with exotic cultures and a physical challenge that is actually attainable by motivated mortals within a manageable time frame, then read on.

In August 1992 I undertook a journey of discovery and adventure. Commencing in a bustling city called Rawalpindi in Northern Pakistan, I traced the Karakoram Highway, known as the KKH, all the way to the Khunjerab Pass, lying on the border between Pakistan and China. Since then, many travellers and adventurers have made this journey and it has been written about and photographed quite frequently.

What is mentioned much less are the magnificent trekking opportunities dotted throughout the Karakoram. To reach any place along or near the KKH requires some effort and perseverance, but if you enjoy true, raw adventure, this is best found on foot, far from the road and all its comforts and safety nets.



En route to Skardu from Gilgit

I strayed from that road several times during my journey along the KKH in 1992 and discovered intriguing cultures and magnificent scenery each time. But it was Baltistan that made the deepest impression on me.

Five years passed, an exciting, challenging and varied time it was too. But something my Balti guide, Rozi Ali, said to me when we finally reached the top of 5,900m Gondokhoro La and peered into the mist on the far side, kept playing on my mind. "Next time you come, we go down there to K2 base camp, insha Allah". "Yes" I thought, "in my dreams".

It took 5 years to fulfill that dream, but in August 1997 I indeed found myself standing again on Gondokhoro La. Under a beautiful full moon, I gazed back to K2 once more. The difference this time was that I had just been to K2 base camp, even spending a night there. That blend of exhilaration, tranquillity, satisfaction and wonder that keeps drawing me back to the high mountains was coursing through my heart once again and, I knew, all the effort and tradeoffs needed to get there had been worth it.

My entire journey had taken only 24 days and, although only 17 of them had actually been on the trail, nearly every day added something to my adventure. It all started and concluded in Rawalpindi. Here I met Ibrahim, my guide, as a total stranger and, three weeks later, embraced him as a friend at the airport before boarding my PIA flight back to Singapore. Together we attended the fiasco masquerading as an official expedition briefing, acquired trekking provisions and travelled the 22 hour bus journey to Skardu (after our one hour flight was cancelled due to unstable weather). By the time we reached Skardu in a rather exhausted, dishevelled state, we had established a good rapport.

If you travel individually, or in a smaller group, the relationship that can develop between trekker, guide and porters forms a special aspect of a trek in Baltistan, setting it apart from treks in most more accessible places. I enjoyed an intimate opportunity to learn about Balti culture and to actually get to know Balti people in a way I haven't been able to on treks in Nepal, Tibet, Africa or Europe.



A view northwards from my bus, on the southern section of the KKH



Nanga Parbat, viewed from the KKH

Like anything though, you get out what you put in, so it's important to start things off on a good footing. Your choice of trekking agent (see my recommendation in "Travel Tips") and also your own personal approach are fundamental to this. Balti people, my guide Ibrahim being a good example, are, by nature, strong, honest, courteous and hospitable. Throughout my entire journey Ibrahim's primary focus was my welfare and happiness and he more than lived up to the high expectations formed from my experience with Rozi Ali five years before.

But it's important to also reflect some of these qualities. I met other trekkers, usually Europeans in much larger parties, who weren't enjoying the same camaraderie that my little group were. Treat your guide and porters as people who deserve respect and they will treat you like royalty; treat them like servants and, not surprisingly, they will not.

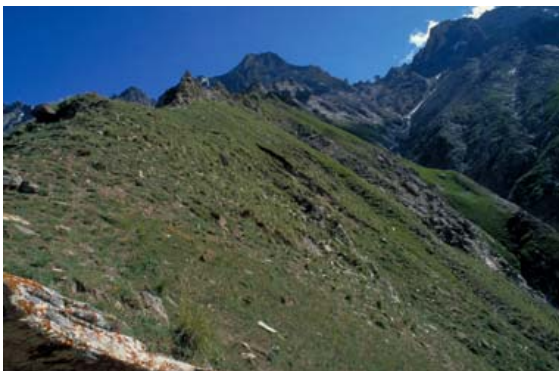
At a photo stop on the outskirts of Skardu I set the tone by christening our party, myself included, the "A Team". The men found this amusing and immediately set about living up to their new title. Throughout the trek, despite some very big days and several changes to plan, all the porters maintained beaming smiles and total cooperation.

Our first deviation from plan happened on day two when I found it physically impossible to cross 5,087m Skoro Pass. Although fit enough, I'd simply ascended far too quickly for my body to acclimatize. I'm well acquainted with the effects of high altitude but, hoping to make up for time lost earlier en route to Skardu, I'd fooled myself into believing that all would be well if I "trekked high and slept low".



Having shaken a headache after sleeping the first night at 3,400m, I set off optimistically to cross the pass and then descend again quickly to 3,500m on the far side. By the time I reached 4,400m on the ascent however, still with 700 vertical metres of climbing to go, my pounding head informed me in no uncertain terms that to proceed further would be foolhardy.

As a result of ascending too quickly, water was collecting on my brain. I could feel the veins on my temples bulging and the possibility of coma and even death became all too real. I decided to descend to 4,000m, camp the night, and hope that my headache would again subside. The A Team took it in their stride, constructing me a shelf just large enough to accommodate my tent on the steep hillside.



Next morning my head still throbbed, confirming that I'd need to take the long way, by jeep track to Thungol (2,850m), which is the normal starting point for trekkers bound for Concordia or K2 Base Camp.

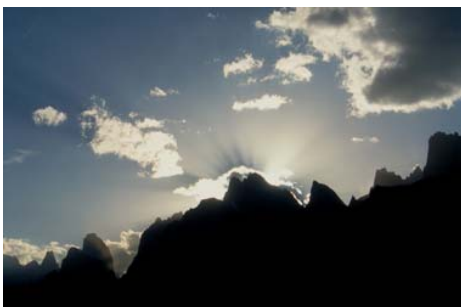
This additional delay concerned me, but the jolting jeep ride round to Thungol was unforgettable never the less. Following the Shigar River, we bashed our way across parched rubble and dust, often sandwiched between yawning chasms and sheer cliffs.

Top left, my shelf camp at 4,000m Bottom left, looking towards Skoro La Top right, the "A Team"

After nightfall, as we neared Thungol, a tributary stream swollen by glacier melt during the heat of the day had become a raging torrent, washing away the bridge and barring our way. In horror, I leapt from the cab when I realised that our driver actually had sufficient faith in Toyota's four wheel drive technology to attempt fording the gushing waters. My reward for doubting him was a bone chilling stumble on foot to the other side, aided by a concerned Hussain, one of my porters.

My concern for the delays we'd suffered also turned out to be unnecessary, as in the next five days the A Team moved steadily up the Shigar valley, up on to the gray rubble of the Baltoro glacier and on to Concordia. Blessed with crystal clear weather and a small, mobile, flexible team, we covered in five days what the larger parties normally cover in eight or so days.

Below 4,000m, the sun's heat was a brutal assault after 11am, and not just for living beings. On the first day, after trudging across a vast plain and then tackling an unexpectedly challenging rock descent, the soles of my boots began parting company with their leather uppers.



Above, the tenuous cable way across the Dumordo River

Top left, sunburst over the Trangos

Bottom left, the A Team on the Baltoro glacier

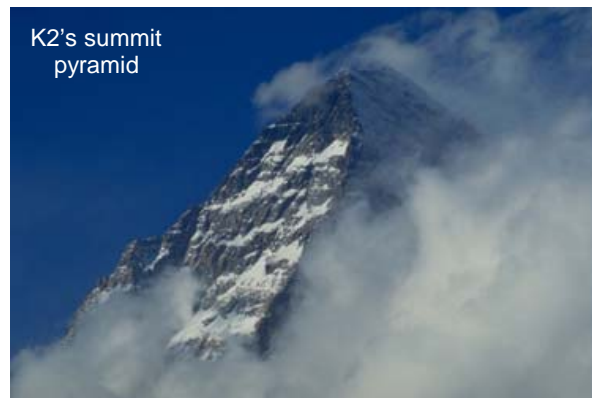
Given the ruggedness of the terrain, this could have spelt disaster for me. But luck was on my side. As I struggled down the almost sheer rock face, I caught up with an older trekker who was finding the going very tough. He was a big man, a Canadian in his fifties, named Gerry Weathers.

At the bottom, after congratulating one another for reaching terra firma in one piece, I asked by chance if he was carrying any glue for boot repairs. This is when I learnt of his moving plight.

Almost exactly two years before, in atrocious weather on the upper reaches of K2, the mountain had claimed his son. On the first serious trek of his life, Gerry was now on his way to K2 Base Camp to place a memorial to him. As a father to a three year old boy myself (whom I was already missing dearly), I could barely contain my tears upon hearing this. The good fortune in it was that Gerry indeed was carrying glue - industrial strength epoxy resin no less, designed to glue almost anything to anything, including rubber soles to leather uppers and metal plaques to cold, hard, mountain granite. I had no further trouble with my boots.

Four days later, on the only cloudy day of the trek, we reached Concordia (4,650m). This is a focal point for most trekkers in Baltistan, being where the first unimpeded sighting of K2 comes dramatically into view. At 8,611m, her summit is the second highest place on earth, standing as a natural wonder of the world about 10 horizontal and (a daunting) four vertical kms up the Godwin Austin glacier, which collides with the Baltoro glacier at Concordia.

It seemed to me, as I gazed frequently in her direction during the next few days, that K2 was a seductress. On the first evening she revealed only fleeting glimpses of various parts of her gigantic south face through thick, swirling clouds. Occasionally her pyramid like summit flirted with my zoom lens, seeming to hover over the Godwin Austin glacier, as if defying gravity.



After sunset that evening, heavy snow sagged the walls of my little tent. K2 was nowhere to be seen next morning but, by mid afternoon, relentless ultraviolet rays had burnt many of the clouds away. K2 revealed a little more of herself, seeming to gain confidence. Her frighteningly steep southeast ridge appeared for the first time and I realised why she was such a killer of climbers. I could also understand now why so many of the world's alpinists feel compelled to pit their skills against her.

That evening, around midnight, I peered from my tent to see K2 in her entirety, glowing under a three quarter moon. Next morning she stood naked before us in a magnificent clear dawn, beckoning me to come closer, which is exactly what we did.

It was an uncanny feeling as we advanced up the Godwin Austin glacier. Apart from their otherworldly, ice and rubble covered surfaces, glaciers are dynamic, shifting and changing constantly. Occasionally, a strange sensation permeated my consciousness. A barely perceptible tremor, accompanied by a sound resembling a gigantic, high tensile, steel cable snapping when maximum tension has been exceeded. I realised that this was the glacier cracking and it was rather unnerving.

That afternoon was emotionally charged for another reason as well. As we moved up the glacier, I couldn't shake Gerry Weathers from my mind. My feelings were intensified because I missed my son Ben a little more as each day passed, possibly due to the feeling of isolation I now felt, so far from home.

Then we reached the Gilkey memorial, silently perched above K2 Base Camp and surrounded by a soberingly large number of other memorials to those who've perished on K2 over the years.

Almost every nationality seemed to be represented. It occurred then to me that I was indeed privileged to be in a world not meant for human habitation. An unpredictable world of ice and rock of monolithic proportions. As if to confirm this, less than a week after we left K2 Base Camp, six Japanese climbers were tragically killed in their sleeping bags by an avalanche while camped at base camp.

That night we slept at the foot of K2 at 5,200m, the highest place I've ever slept. Despite the obnoxious odour of three unwashed men in a small, two man tent, I was glad of both the warmth and companionship they afforded.



Ibrahim lays flowers above K2 base camp



Ibrahim silhouetted against the South face of K2



The A Team on Vigne glacier

Early next morning, Ibrahim and I roped up before setting off further up Godwin Austin glacier in the direction of China. We eventually reached a yawning crevasse at about 5,700m that barred our way forward. Huge seracs jutted up all about us in a mazelike world of bizarre, tortured ice. Behind and high above us, an ominous rumbling sound intensified as K2 released another avalanche of snow and ice. My head pounded again, convincing me that it was time to go. The adventurer in me felt satisfied.

But our adventures weren't over. Next day was our most exhausting and, in a way, most notable because, according to Ibrahim and several other guides, the A Team became the first trekking group to trek from Concordia over Gondokhoro La to Gondokhoro high camp in a single day. I'm not surprised, as it took us an exhausting 10 and a half hours on the trail and we wouldn't have even chosen to undertake the challenge at all had there been fewer trekking groups in the area.

Despite the remoteness of Concordia, many groups now trek there each season and the numbers are escalating. When confronted with a snow clad, partially technical, high altitude pass like Gondokhoro La, this can result in serious congestion and safety hazards.

As we watched more and more trekkers and porters arrive at Mexis Camp at the base of the north side of the pass, Ibrahim suggested to me that we make a night ascent "to avoid the crowds". It was to be a full moon and the weather was magnificent. "Okay, let's do it" I rather pensively replied.

So, at 7pm, as the moon peered from behind Vigne Peak, the A Team made our way silently, roped together in single file, across the Vigne glacier. The silvery moon light was so bright that we hardly needed our torchlights. Our crampons bit reassuringly into the rapidly refreezing snow as we commenced our ascent up the 600m, 50 degree snow slope.

My only complaints were a hacking, high altitude cough and an untimely bout of severe gastric wind. In fact, I was partly jet propelled up that slope, feeling obliged to shout "Sultan... Bomb" to the unfortunate porter roped directly behind me each time my bowls went into turbo mode.

The climb only took two and half hours but was exhausting at that altitude. My porters patiently climbed at my pace as I gulped in as much oxygen as I could. I could only marvel at their strength and stamina once again.



A brew up before we set off for Gondokhoro La

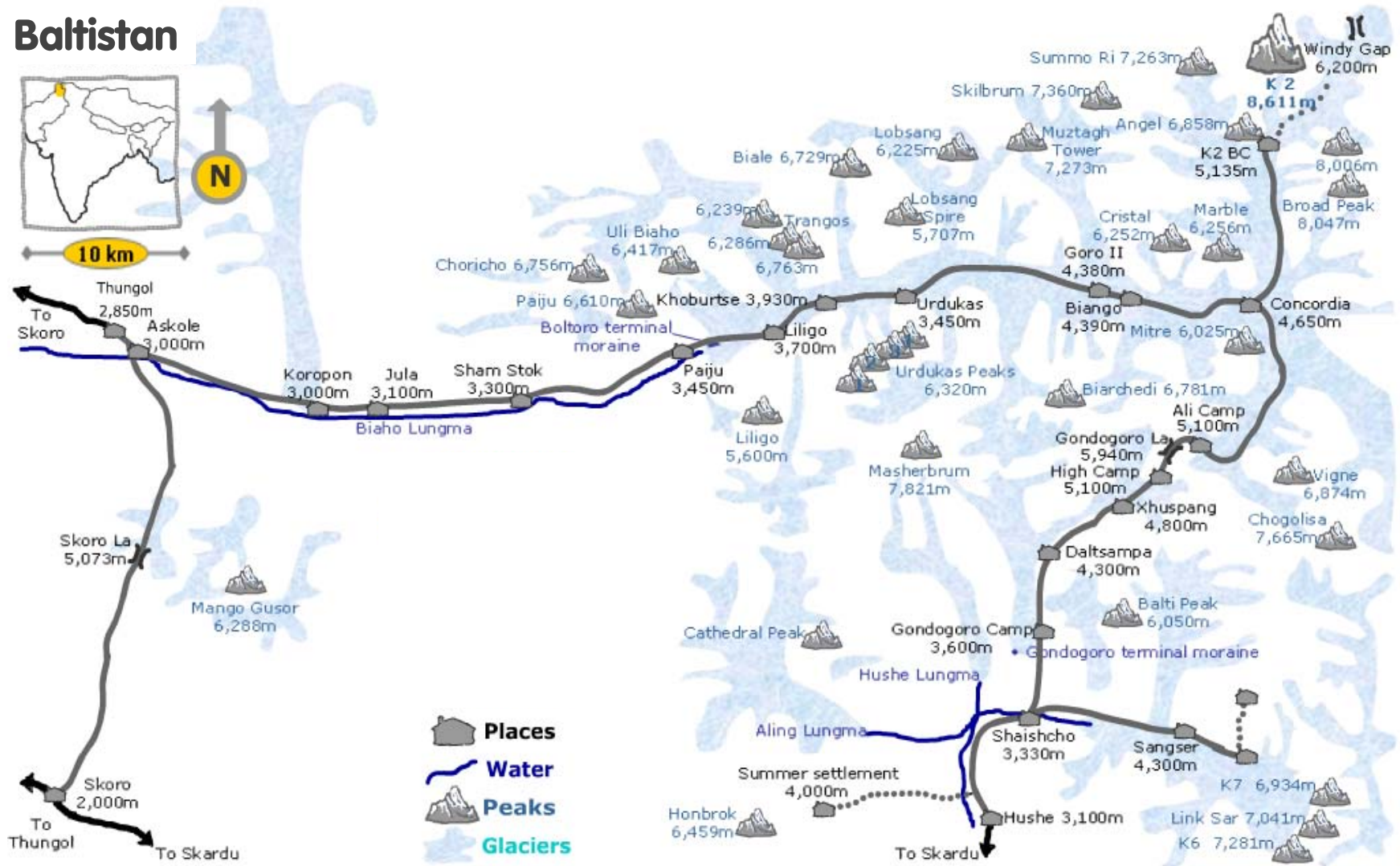
Below left, Snow Dome under moon light, from K2 base camp



We reached the pass at 10pm and, after regaining my composure, I turned back, not to swirling clouds and fog like it had been five years before, but to a perfectly clear panorama bathed in a magical silver light - K2 and her other 8,000m sisters Broad Peak and Gasherbrum, plus a multitude of others over 7,000m all lay before us. I thought again of Rozi Ali. If he'd been there he would have contentedly sighed his signature phrase "aahhh, successsss".

Several minutes passed before I realised that a chill wind had started blowing from the direction of K2. I also felt a deep tiredness enveloping me, akin to that of a driver who can't keep his eyes open, yet has hours of driving still between him and his bed. It was time to commence the precarious descent on loose rocks to Gondokhoro High Camp. But at least I was back on familiar ground with the warm feeling of satisfaction at accomplishing a five year dream.

Baltistan



When to go

- Between June and August is summer time. This is when the weather is most stable, offering blue skies and warmer temperatures much of the time.

What to bring

- Your trekking agent/guide can source virtually everything you need for you, but I recommend that you bring your own essentials - basic medical supplies, boots, alpine clothing, sleeping bag, torch and spare batteries, backpack (with detachable daypack), camera gear and film, effective sunglasses and sunblock.

Permits

- All trekkers, whatever nationality, need a trekking permit for each restricted trekking area you intend to visit in Pakistan. Your trekking agent can arrange this for you prior to arrival if you send photocopies of your passport, Pakistan visa and several passport sized photos of each member of your party.

Medical considerations

- You need cholera, Hepatitis A & B, Japanese B and Meningococcal Meningitis vaccinations.
- It is advisable to take a course of general purpose antibiotics that treat respiratory and digestive tract infections.
- Purify all water before drinking.
- Respect the dangers of high altitude by ascending at the recommended rate to permit effective acclimatization.

How to organize your trek

- If you intend trekking for more than a few days and in restricted areas, there is much to organise. It's possible to do this yourself (consult the Lonely Planet Trekking Guide to the Karakoram), but I strongly recommend that you hire a trekking agent to do it for you. The best position is to have a personal recommendation on a trekking agent. In this I can unreservedly recommend **Mountain Travels Pakistan**, who I've now used twice. Their contact details are;
 - **Mr Ghulam Ahmad**
 - 507 Poonch House Complex, Adamjee Road, Rawalpindi
 - PO Box 622, Pakistan
 - Fax (001 92 51) 528 596, Ph (001 92 51) 528 595
 - Ask for **Ibrahim** or **Rozi Ali** as your guide and you'll be well looked after.

Tricks for new players

- Internal flights into the Karakoram are notoriously unreliable. Within your itinerary, allow for the possibility of travelling by road if your flights are cancelled.
- Always carry your passport, as there are many police check posts in the northern areas.
- If you are visiting restricted areas, get your trekking agency to confirm in advance the time of your "official briefing", as sometimes the official will not give briefings on Fridays or public holidays, which can result in wasted precious days.

Geography

- A mountainous region of some 15,177 square kms (115 square kms were split off in the Indo/Pak war of 1971).
- Home to many of the worlds' highest peaks (including K2, at 8,611m, the second highest) and longest glaciers.
- K2 is so named because, a geographical survey conducted by the British in 1800s incorrectly calculated that K2 was the second tallest peak in the Karakoram range, hence it was christened "K2". The Baltis also know K2 as Chogori, Chogo meaning great and ri meaning mountain.
- Geographically young and still rising as the earth's Indian and Eurasian plates continue their collision, resulting in dramatically sheer and jagged peaks, rock slides and avalanches.
- Spectacularly diverse scenery ranging from the arid valleys below 3,000m, to lush meadows and forests up to around 4,000m, to vertical lands of rock, snow and ice amongst the vast array of high peaks, to the flat expanse of the Deosai plateau.
- Temperatures ranging from 44 degrees C in the heat of the day in the valleys, to -30 degrees C in the mountains in the depths of winter (Nov - Mar).
- A path for several of the worlds' great rivers to cut through, including the mighty Indus.

People

- The population is approaching 600,000, made up of people of both Mongol (Tibetan) and Arian descent.
- The main language is Balti (many similarities to Tibetan), but Shina and Kashmiri are also spoken.
- Prior to the 15th century Buddhism was the main religion, replaced by (Shia) Islam since then.
- Being agriculture based, most Baltis live in the 230 villages situated in the huge network of river valleys. The largest town is Skardu, housing some 40,000. Balti cuisine has assimilated many dishes from the south like dhal, roti, and gravy based curries, but it still features many Tibetan dishes made from grains, such as Tsampa from barley. Meat is an important part of Balti cuisine, just as it is further south.

Economy

- Virtually all industry occurs outside the snow bound winter months, when activities are confined indoors.
- Agriculture forms the basis, mostly for local consumption. Fruits and potatoes are exported from Baltistan as are some woollen products and precious stones.
- Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries and a key source of foreign exchange. It is widely supported by the Balti people as an opportunity to improve their standard of living.

Technology

- Until Mountaineering became popular in the 50s, remote Baltistan had very little contact with the outside world and the Baltis essentially lived as they had for centuries. Only when an airlink to Skardu began in the 60s did regular outside contact begin. Tourism has only been significant since 1986 when the KKH was opened to tourists.
- Now the main towns have electricity and small hydro projects will soon bring electricity to smaller villages like Hushe. The power supply is 220 volts, 50 cycles AC.
- Telephones are STD in the main towns and C.B. in the rural areas. Mobiles are not yet operable. No one is yet on the internet.