The KKH In 30 Days

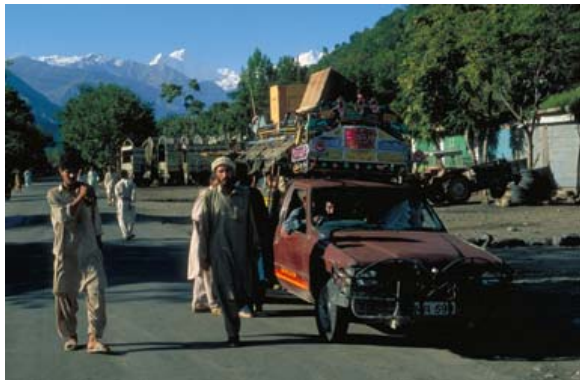
By Peter Laurenson

An integral part of most remote alpine experiences is the challenge of actually getting there. The preamble required before the walking even starts is often an adventure in itself. In August 1992, I embarked on such a journey in northern Pakistan.

Despite it being 4 am, the ear splitting air horns of scores of ramshackle Bedford buses still shattered the peace at Rawalpindi's Pir Wadhai bus station. This piercing fan-fare marks the beginning of most journeys along the Karakoram Highway, or KKH as it's often referred to.

Having suffered a hacking cough since landing in Karachi two weeks earlier, my digestive system now also decided to mark the occasion with a violent outbreak of diarrhea and vomiting. Inhaling black exhaust fumes belched from many leaking exhaust pipes, I wretched as I staggered across the oil soaked tarmac to a claustrophobically crammed bus. The thought of a 19 hour bus ride taunted me as I failed to find a comfortable position on my hard, narrow bench seat. Despite my relatively small 5 feet 10 inches, my knees still jammed against the back of the bench seat in front of me. I groaned as we lurched out of the Pir Wadhai terminal at 4.15 am.

Above, truckies on the KKH like to make a statement via their vehicles!
Below, on the KKH south of Gilgit



My condition deteriorated as the hours rolled by. By the mid point, my head pounded, my neck ached, my throat was raw and parched from continuous coughing and I had a fierce fever. All I wanted to do was lie down still, but that was impossible for at least another 10 hours.

At the time, that bus ride felt like a little dose of hell on earth, certainly not my choice of introduction to the KKH. Prior to arriving in Pakistan I'd been traveling in Africa. So, in my depleted state, I fretted that my symptoms seemed to align with Malaria. When we finally reached Gilgit, I had a malaria test, which came back negative, putting my mind at rest. The cooler climate and good food in Gilgit did the rest, returning me quickly to good health.

My regret was only being able to recall fleeting moments of the amazing journey along that first 620 kms of the KKH. Disjointed images of layer upon layer of huge sand hills and rocky out crops, sun bleached under a stark, blue sky, blurred into other impressions of a mighty, mud gray river, the Indus, surging and swirling below the winding road. At times, large stands of pine trees flashed by my dust coated window and, occasionally in the distance, huge snow clad peaks swam in and out of view. Though in no state to recognise it, one of those magnificent peaks was Nanga Parbat, an 8,126 metre giant that more climbers have perished on than most other mountains.

In keeping with the impressive scenery, the KKH also has a fascinating history, dating back thousands of years. Long before a highway even existed, the route represented a particularly precarious section of the ancient Silk Route traversing the jagged, mountains of the Karakoram.

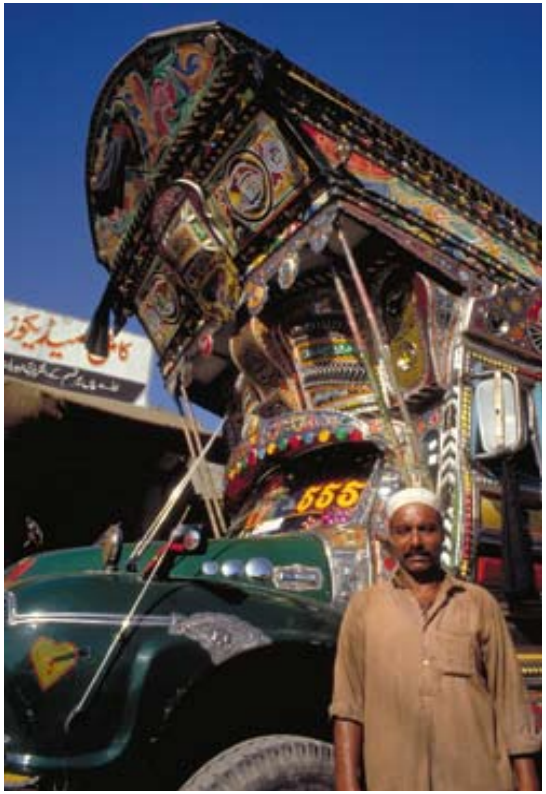
And some two millennia before that, the route was already plied by neolithic tribes, some of whom left their calling cards on the rock walls containing the Indus River. Some of their most enduring rock carvings can still be seen today.

The Silk Route, linking China and Rome, was always more than just a trading corridor. Marco Polo travelled it in the fourteenth century and wrote about his journey and, at various times gold, fine arts, religion and even blood flowed along it.

A period of decline came upon the Silk Route in the fifteenth century when Tamerlane, the Moslem invader from Afghanistan, carried out a ruthless process of 'purification' in the area. At the same time, the Portuguese navigator, Vasco da Gama, discovered an alternative sea-borne route from Europe to Asia around Africa, thereby removing the need to move overland at all.

Between then and the 1960s, the route fell into relative obscurity, being plied only by the local people living in that inaccessible domain. Politics revived the route in the mid 60s when Pakistan and China decided to join hands. A plan was initiated to revive the Silk Route, resulting in the KkH. Linking the ancient oasis town of Kashgar in Xinjiang Province with Rawalpindi, it took 20 years and more than 500 lives to complete the 1,260 km road, which finally opened to tourists in 1986.

It took nearly four weeks to cover the entire length of the Pakistani section of the highway, reaching the Khunjerab Pass on a gloomy day in early September. The entire journey offered a smorgasbord of cultural discoveries and alpine experiences.



A proud truckie in Gilgit

When compared to my experiences in the Himalaya, one of the most obvious differences was the people. Except for the Baltis, who came originally from Tibet, the people of the Karakoram are mainly of Caucasian descent, giving them a distinctly different physical appearance to those, mainly of mongoloid origins, in the Himalaya.

Another significant aspect which distinguished the people of the Karakoram from those in the Himalaya was their Moslem faith. The strangely haunting Islamic wail "Allah u akbar...", emanating regularly from the numerous muezzins in parts of the Karakoram, replaced the quiet but incessant chant of the Buddhist mantra "Om mani padme hum", heard so often in areas inhabited by Tibetan Buddhists.

Although Hinduism spread to the Karakoram via the Indus Valley, Islam, introduced by Afghani invaders in the eleventh century, soon displaced Hinduism. It is Islam which now provides a degree of cohesion that might otherwise be absent amongst the diverse tribes, with their different languages, customs and social systems, scattered throughout this rugged area. And even with an almost universally Moslem population, Sunni, Ismaili and Shia factions still find cause for conflict from time to time in the Karakoram.

Travelling north along the highway, the first district is Kohistan. The people are strict Sunni Moslems, distinguished by the orange henna dyed beards of some of the menfolk and by the veil, or purdah, worn by women to hide from the glances of strange men. The local language is Khowari.

A volatile area, where the men carry guns for more than just hunting, Kohistani villages were still intensely independent, governed by village councils, or Jirga. Clashes with the Pakistani establishment and also between villages have occurred, so caution was advisable when in Kohistan. But in my delirious state, I wasn't even aware when we passed through it. My only concern was when we would reach Gilgit.

Situated at 1,500 metres beside the Gilgit river, with a backdrop of towering rock walls, Gilgit is the major town in the Karakoram. Gilgit has always been an important trading centre and, as such, houses a mix of residents and visitors from all over the region and from all three streams of Islam. In the past this Islamic cocktail has proved rather volatile. In Gilgit there is a local tongue known as Shina and, if any single stream of Islam prevails, then it is Ismaili.

To the east of Gilgit is Baltistan, at one time actually part of Tibet, before being claimed by Moslems from Kashmir in the sixteenth century. Many great mountains are located here, including the mighty K2. Saichen, the largest glacier in the Karakoram and Himalaya also grinds a path through this area.

Left, a view from a light aircraft en route from Gilgit to Skardu
Right, a view from the gravel road below Hushe

Many Baltis live at higher altitudes, removed from the hustle of Gilgit and the KKH. Consequently, a special and endearing mountain-dweller temperament tends to replace the tribal tensions that are sometimes evident further south. Baltis are mainly farmers and shepherds. They too have their own local tongue, simply referred to as Balti.

From Gilgit I took a diversion east off the highway into Baltistan, first to Skardu lying on the banks of the Indus at 2,300 metres, then on via a remarkable jeep ride to the ancient and still highly traditional village of Hushe at 3,050 metres. From Hushe the only way on is by foot. The area is home to the colossal snow and ice covered pyramid known internationally as K2, as well as a host of other gigantic and spectacularly beautiful mountains.

Trekking in Baltistan largely involves following continually changing trails up huge glaciers such as the Ghondokhoro and Charakusa. It is rugged but amazing terrain. The jagged, steep closeness of the area and the views of the various mighty peaks are magnificent.

Unlike the Nepal Himalaya which, even at high altitudes, is relatively populated, in the Karakoram the extreme nature of much of the landscape makes permanent habitation untenable. This means that those who walk the mountain trails of the region must carry with them virtually all they will need to sustain them during the journey. With this comes additional effort, but also a heightened sense of seclusion.

However, during the warmest months, it is possible to come by shepherds grazing their flocks in the high pastures. With a little luck, they will have freshly made curd to share with passers by, in return for news from the villages below. There can be no better place to appreciate curd, which tastes like nectar of the gods when enjoyed in these circumstances. I've found that a heightened appreciation of simple pleasures is a natural consequence of spending time in the mountains.

The foreground of this picture, taken from Solo Pass, is the Batowaraho glacier. To the east, seemingly surrounding this ice bowl, were Chogolisa 1 (7,668 metres), Chogolisa 2 (7,654 metres), Snow Dome (7,150 metres), Baltoro Kangri (7,800 metres), Golden Peak (7,275 metres), Sia Kangri (7,422 metres), Saltoro Kangri (6,500 metres) and Sherpi Kangri (7,380 metres)

My route reached two high altitude passes. The first was Ghondokhoro La at around 5,900 metres. To proceed beyond the pass required a special permit issued by the Government of Pakistan which, at the time I didn't have. Even so, from the pass K2 was clearly visible. The second was Solo Pass at 5,350 metres, also affording superb views of a host of less famous, yet equally spectacular peaks. I spent an unforgettable two weeks in Baltistan. Five years later I would be back, this time with a permit to cross Ghondokhoro La.

Northward of Gilgit along the KKH is Nagar and Hunza. These adjoining areas are judged by many to be the most scenic in the entire Karakoram. They are also renowned for their prolific apricot groves. In season, you can see great quantities of the fruit being sun dried on the flat baked earth rooves of the houses in the area. The economy is largely agrarian, with 75% of food requirements being produced locally.

Hunzakuts and Nagarkuts are reputedly descendants of Alexander the Great and his conquering forces. However, despite their military ancestry, in contrast to Kohistan in the south, villages here are less tribal. Neighbouring villages have agreed to merge into mirdoms, creating a less volatile, more peaceful atmosphere. A "Salaam", accompanied by a friendly smile, is a common occurrence in the towns and on the trails in Hunza and Nagar.

The Women's dress also reflects a more liberal atmosphere here. It is characterised by brightly coloured clothing and round, equally colourful, embroidered caps. The exception to this is in Karimabad, where the chador is still worn.

The area has a local language known as Burushaski and the prominent streams of Islam are Ismaili in Hunza, and Shia in Nagar. Shia also predominates in the nearby valleys of Bagrot and Haramosh.

Although not spending as long as I did in Baltistan, I was able to sample the mountains at closer quarters again twice while traveling northwards through Hunza. First was via a trail up to Rakaposhi base camp above the little village of Minapin; and then again via a climb up to Hon Ridge above Karimabad and Altit. Indeed, the Hunza's reputation for beauty was borne out even from the grimy bus window as I slowly climbed along the KKH, as views of lofty peaks became the norm.

Above, the view from Rakaposhi BC; and below, from Hon Ridge

At 2,000 m, Minapin is a dusty little village about 4km off the main highway. From it I followed a trail, beside a particularly steep glacier, up to the base camp at 3,500 m. Due to the steep gradient, the glacier is strikingly clean and white. As I neared base camp there were countless house-sized ice formations jutting out of its surface. A scramble up the moraine wall to about 3,800 m rewarded me with a fantastic panorama of Rakaposhi (7,788 m) to Diran (7,270 m), including the 30km wall joining the two mountains and a massive neve in which they deposit their snow and ice.

A little further north lay three villages – Karimabad, Baltit and Altit, that merged to form a very picturesque setting at 2,500 m. Perched above Altit was a nine centuries old fort that commands magnificent views northeast up the KKH, as well as a fascinating vantage point from which to watch all the goings on in the village below. And looking westward, Ultar Peak (7,390 m) soared skyward.

Departing before 5am in order to avoid the heat of the day, with the guidance of a local shepherd named Arif, I followed a trail up alongside the Ultar glacier to a 300 year old shepherds hut at 3,300 m. After a very smoky chi stop we then scrambled on up a steeper section leading to Hon Ridge at 4,790 m. Our vantage point offered some stupendous views back down to the KKH some 2.2 vertical kms below, as well as some much closer views of the frighteningly sheer walls of Ultar Peak, among others.

Unfortunately for me, just as we were about to set out on the return journey, without warning I endured a startlingly rapid recurrence of the gastric affliction I had endured en route to Gilgit nearly four weeks previously. It wasn't a great spot for this to happen as I had yet to descend some pretty steep terrain before I could curl up and die peacefully back down in Karimabad. By the time I reached the shepherd's hut I was wretching, my legs ached, my throat was parched and my head pounded. By the time I reached Karimabad it all went to custard.

That night was a steady stream of high powered, watery front and rear end purges. At least, a couple of days later I had recovered sufficiently to savour some fabulous memories of my time on Hon Ridge.

Still further north is Gojal, alternatively referred to as upper Hunza. Gojalis number fewer than 18,000 and are descendants of nomadic Afghani herdsman, although today agriculture provides their main form of income. Gojalis are predominantly Ismaili Moslems and womenfolk enjoy greater freedom here than in most other parts of the Karakoram. They are not required to wear chador. Gojalis speak a Persian influenced local tongue known as Wakhi.

North of Gojal, the Karakoram Highway zigzagged me upwards through tortured granite walls to a height of 4,730 metres at the Khunjerab Pass, 955 kms north of Rawalpindi. On the way to the pass the mountains closed in on the highway so that the sun was all but excluded and the air remained constantly damp. The Pass marked Pakistan's northern border with China.

Above, the Khunjerab Pass on a bleak afternoon

The people on the Chinese side of the Pass were mainly Uyghurs. Although also Moslems (Sunnies), they were quite distinct from their Pakistani neighbours to the south. Differences included language, style of housing and dress, and also their physical environment. In fact, passing from Pakistan (the Karakoram) over the Khunjerab Pass into China (the Pamir) was like passing from night into day.

As the Karakoram gave way to the Pamir, so steep, jagged, fortress like ramparts gave way to widely spaced, rolling meadows - the contrast was spectacular and almost instantaneous.

Aside from over-nighting at Sust (2,700 m), the check post on the Pakistani side of the border, I didn't pause along the Pakistani section of the KKH again beyond Karimabad. This wasn't for lack of things to see and do, but because word from travelers coming from China to the north, was that Tibet had unofficially opened to independent travelers. The opportunity to visit Tibet, unimpeded by the limitations normally encountered in official group travel situations, just seemed too good to pass by. In hindsight, it was very lucky that my focus did shift in this way. Only three days after crossing the Khunjerab Pass, very heavy rain fell on the southern side. News reports soon confirmed that more than seventy landslides along a 10 km section had rendered the KKH impassable. Scores of fatalities had been suffered, including a European traveler.

While serving to accentuate my good fortune when I did indeed reach Lhasa later, what happened on the south side of the KKH after I had safely crossed the Khunjerab Pass also shattered any associations I might have formed, consciously or otherwise, between the highways of my own country and the KKH.

While the roads in New Zealand generally have a feeling of permanence about them, any such feeling about the KKH, or for that matter any road in the Karakoram or Himalaya, is fatally flawed.


Moving a yurt frame beside Karakul Lake

Although Tibet now beckoned, there were still more traveling treasures to be discovered before I completed the entire 1,260 kms of the KKH. First stop beyond the pass itself was Piralee (4,000 m), the check post on the Chinese side. 100 km further on, after what seemed a gradually descending meander through far off icing sugar coated mounds, was Tashkurghan (3,700 m). Most notable on this leg of the journey were the large, hairy camels with two floppy humps and breaths to be avoided at all costs.


Elderly gentlemen in Kashgar

Beyond Tashkurghan lay Karakul Lake (3,600 m) and, reflected in it were Mount Kongur, at 7,720 m, the highest peak in the Pamirs and Muztagh Ata (7,540 m). The Lake side also offered an early opportunity to sleep in a Yurt, the large but portable tent housing of the nomadic Uyghurs.

North of Karakul Lake was Kashgar. With a long Moslem history, the old part of town was still essentially a maze of mud walled alleyways, intriguing bazaars and old mosques. However, a much larger Chinese sprawl of dusty, poplar lined avenues and faceless concrete buildings had sprung up more recently.

People power is in abundance throughout China, even in the far flung outpost of Kashgar, so human endeavor comes cheap. It seemed that every where I went in the town there were craftsmen working their trades – casket makers, knife peddlers, furniture makers, bakers, weavers and cloth merchants; the list went on. The town hosted colourful markets on Wednesdays and Sundays, where people from all over the region congregated to haggle loudly.

If the hustle of the streets became over powering there was always the subdued atmosphere inside the many mosques around the town to retreat to. Some of them, like the Id Kah Mosque, were many centuries old, exuding immense character and history.

In contrast to most places on the male dominated Pakistani side of the KKH, women were much more in evidence in Kashgar. Although some still wore brown knitted veils over their faces, long flowing robes gave way to gaily coloured dresses and even mini skirts.

Kashgar marked the end of my journey along the KKH and the town was no anti climax. Although I still had another three months of overland journeying across China ahead of me, it seemed like quite a milestone reaching the ancient town. It also had a real sense of occasion about it, as I sensed my journey along the KKH to be most likely a once in a life time experience. I suppose time will tell.

The Karakoram Highway