

Over the Top of the World

By Diana Chambers

“Expect the unexpected on the Karakoram Highway.”

Thus forewarned, we set out from Kashgar—Kashi to the Chinese—already half a day late due to “problems” up the road. But we are undaunted, lured by the spell of the Silk Road—and its modern incarnation, the Karakoram Highway. Still, it is not easy to leave this ancient oasis of mosques and veils set amid the sands and oilfields of China’s Far West. It is early in the season, though, and jeeps with a red “Border Pass” are rare. We are independent travelers and we have learned to go with the flow.

We pass through village fields, sheep and goats grazing even as the tumbling Ghez River begins to etch a stark canyon. Murky waters twist below as we climb, dark walls closing in on us, a hint of the untamed terrain ahead. Our journey will take us over the top of the world, a land of forbidding peaks and remote plateaus, virtually impenetrable until the mid-eighties. Linking western China and northern Pakistan, the 750 mile—1300 kilometer—KKH was blasted out of the Pamir and Karakoram mountain ranges that rise into the great Himalayas, a mammoth effort that took twenty years and thousands of lives.



So now, communications and trade are no longer restricted to camel caravans. Yet the two-humped Bactrians are everywhere, fueling up among the rocks, disdainful of those limited to fair weather travel. It is May 1, the first day the highway is opened to us weak mortals and our four-

wheel drive vehicles. Yet the way does seem more truly suited to the camels, yaks and horses that accompany our route over the steppes of Central Asia.

A sharp wind picks up, snowflakes pelting our jeep. We gasp as the river is transformed into a shimmering field of ice; beyond it, rolling sand dunes, the glacier-rounded Pamirs rising forever around us, losing themselves in fluffy white. Sweeping almost to the lower peaks is a vast, treeless plateau with “grass so lush,” wrote Marco Polo, “that a lean beast will fatten in ten days.” Today, with spring only hinting, we see yaks picking at bits of new green while geese fly in formation and ducks bob amid shards of ice. But mostly, we see the land—and sense the forces that shaped it.



We are in a world beyond time: The yurts and caravans of tribespeople—some still nomadic—Chinese only by an accident of birth. The proud horsemen who barely give way for our jeep. The camels who bellow their warnings as we edge closer with our cameras. The Tajik family whose adobe compound we “visit,” smiling and nodding, staring curiously but warmly at each other. The menfolk, at least. The shy, graceful women, scarves tied over hats in the local fashion, are busy tending children and sheep and the cooking fires that send smoke swirling into the dusk-softened sky.



We reach Tashkurgan around eight and check into the Pamir Hotel, a threadbare sprawl of cold water showers and empty corridors (last cleaned, according to my husband, in the days of Marco Polo). Woozy from the altitude, we stroll slowly up the dusty street—shopfronts, school, cinema, stretching to the highway like a rough Western town, a border town patrolled by Chinese soldiers. We greet a pair of local Hajjis en route to Mecca, as well as two Pakistani traders heading home from Beijing, who seize upon us, anxious for some word about the pass. They advise us off the hotel restaurant—closed, in any case—directing us to a dive across the street where we drink noodle soup and Xinjiang *pilju*, the region's potent beer. Upon our return, our frigid green room takes on a warm glow and we collapse into our beanbag pillows.



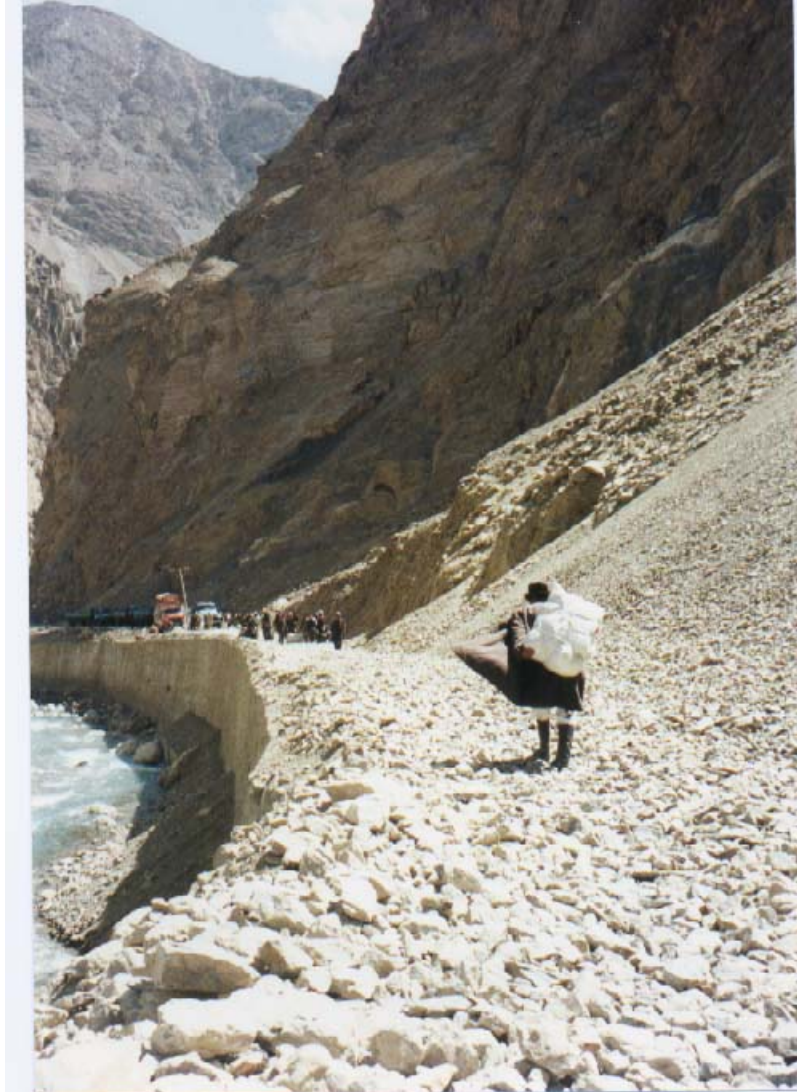
Customs procedures take place outside town next morning. We pass a checkpoint manned by an earnest young guard, then our driver steps on the gas. Yesterday so relaxed, Fang is worried about the weather and in no mood to linger. Especially at the Mintaka Valley, once a major Silk Road artery and now a route to Afghanistan.

We push on, to Pirali, the former customs' post deserted now, even the window glass taken. Fang steers tensely through the desolate yet sublime moonscape, starkly white and black, bitter cold. He honks impatiently at the final checkpoint, the final showing of the red flag, waving stiffly in the icy wind. Yanked from their cozy post, three babyfaced guards appear, easygoing, no sense that we are but a few miles from the border. A cursory passport check, some friendly photos, then onward, up the mountain.



Snowdrifts cover the road as we reach the broad bowl of the summit—the Khunjerab Pass. Grimly, Fang plows through the slush, refusing our request to photograph a sign bidding farewell China, hello Pakistan. We have arrived, but our applause is cut short as the road disappears in the snow and we are forced onto a rutted track, twisting down and around the side of the cliff. With a final sharp turn, we regain the road, as the Pamirs become the Karakoram: jagged walls of granite surrounding us, a deep gorge carved over eons by the rushing Khunjerab River. Before long, we are greeted warmly at Dih, the Pakistani security post, where passports are examined but not stamped.

Kara koram means “black crumbling rock.” It is everywhere, and now, across our path—a piece of frozen mountain, broken off. A bulldozer arrives to clear the slush, but the overhanging rock is still dripping, still cracking. We sense the mountain is alive, an awesome force that refuses to be tamed.



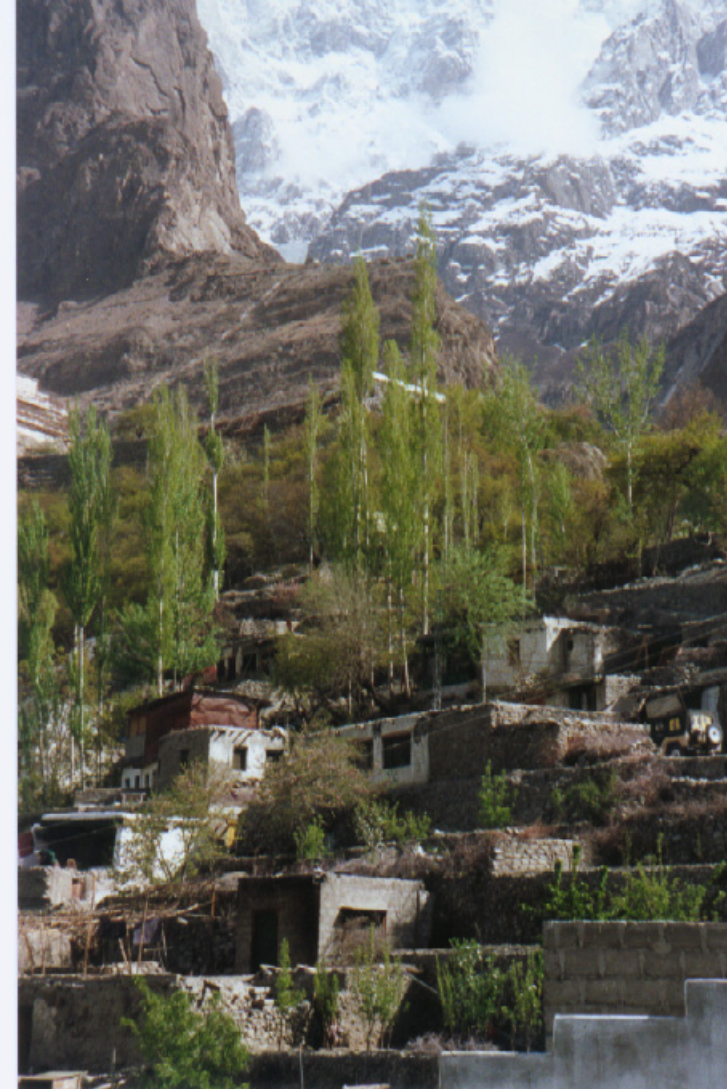
Or ignored...Fang squeals to a halt. An avalanche has blocked traffic on both sides. Glancing up the great cliff, workers furiously shovel rocks into the gorge, backing off as more come showering down. Eyes cast upward, my intrepid husband dashes across the no-man's land to investigate. The verdict: an indeterminate delay. But not for Fang—who is now backing down the road, our belongings in a pile. We are stranded!

Expect the unexpected...

Oblivious to the tumbling rocks, some genial Pakistani wildlife officials help us across the landslip. They lead us to their tiny checkpoint, offering us tea, pointing out protected Marco Polo sheep leaping among the crags. Submitting to these monumental forces, we relax, sitting in the warm sun, sipping tea. As one guard spins wool into yarn, the other flags down a Suzuki sedan, whose wiry driver transports us to the Sust border post.

Formalities over, we set off through a pastoral landscape of neat stone villages, clouds of wispy-pink almond blossoms, slender poplars bending gracefully along the river. And dominating it all, glorious snow-capped peaks radiating a spirit that stirs and elevates. This is Hunza, the inspiration for *Shangri-La*.

A jeep transports us up to Karimabad—and Hilltop House, where we are caught within the embrace of the eternal mountain, ringed by a breathtaking vista of terraced fields, spreading orchards. The sky is achingly blue and the heavens are near.

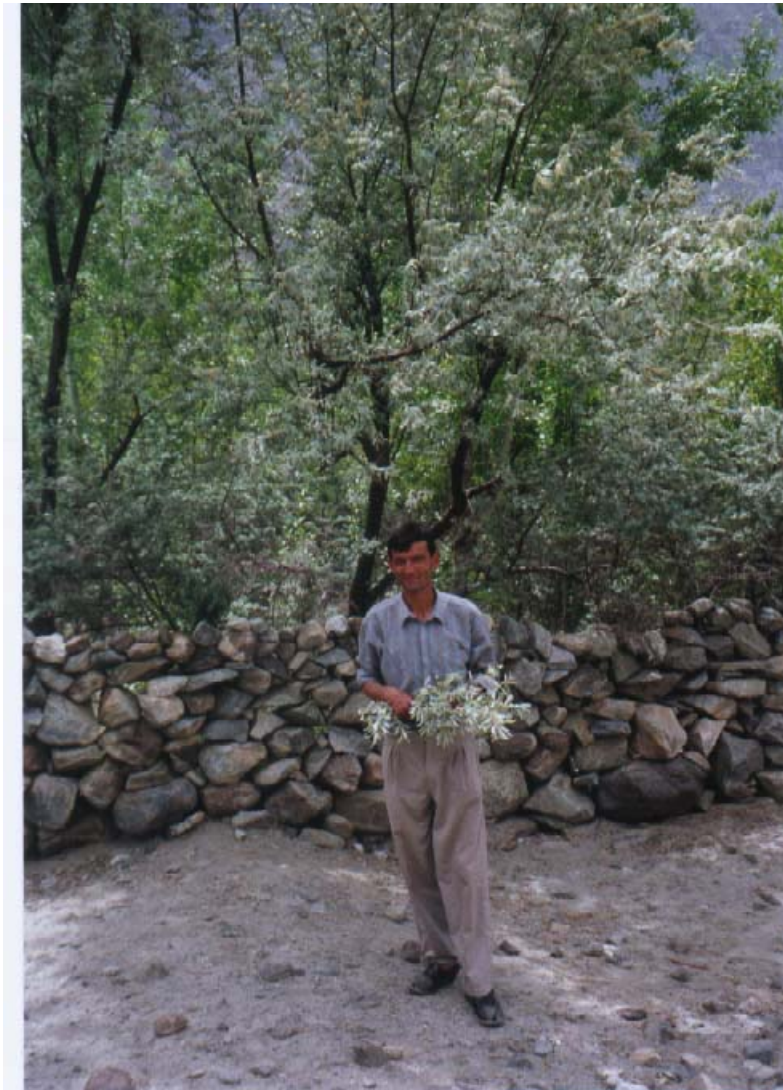


The next morning we meet tall, rangy Beek, a warm and witty companion. We drive through village hillsides, pausing for a moment of silent awe before the purity and power of Mount Rakaposhi. Opposite, high above the Hunza River, Beek points out a narrow jeep track. *When you look down you see only car, no road.* Below it, the ancient trail—and original Silk Road—chipped from sheer cliff or extended stone by stone, no cement.

The Karakoram Highway is at this point only slightly more substantial. Sure-footed as a mountain goat, Beek cruises over rock slides and under threatening cliffs, glancing up over his shoulder, local-style. *The most dangerous part—I tell you only now that we are past.* We pause along the roadside to collect garnets, while below, nomads pan for river gold.

Beek tells us of his life, the life of his people, snowbound all winter, surviving on apricots and wheat, said to be a factor in their famed longevity. His father died recently, aged 101, having seen this mountain kingdom forced into the present—yet never tamed, its stubborn population even now exempt from national taxes. Hunzakuts are hardy individualists who diligently tend their fields, their grapes for “Hunza water.” Devout Muslims who don’t fast for Ramadan...Rather “fasting” all year with their tongue—not to *say* bad things—and with their hands—not to *do* bad things.

We stop at a checkpoint where the guard wears a sprig of Russian olive behind his ear. Beek hands me some. *Put it in your suitcase and it will still be fragrant after one year.*



Descending into the sunny Gilgit valley, we turn into the colonial-style hotel, one of a government chain, a haven of old-fashioned roses and chirping birds. Its manager promises us—*Inshallah* (God willing)—the hotel’s two daily seats on Saturday’s tiny Fokker to Islamabad. But

if we're socked in—as is often the case—we face two more grueling days by road in order to make our connecting flight home. My husband wants a reprieve; I hope for cloud cover.

We relax and enjoy the green. Later, we hear the call to prayer, wood being chopped for the evening's hot water. A group of European kids, traveling through Asia in a Kesey-spirited bus-truck camps on the back lawn, setting up tents, cooking a communal meal.

We're up early, anxious for our "letter of transit" from the powerful manager. We hurry to the airline office, pay 1310 rupees and are told to return at noon. Dallying in the bazaar, we unearth a fine hanging of old textile remnants, then collect our tickets. We return for a photo session with our waiter's family, taking tea in their courtyard under a spreading mulberry tree, while a photo of Ayatollah Khomeini hangs inside.



At dinner we chat with a cheery Pakistani lady just back from a family jaunt to the "Top," where they encountered our rock and snow slides, then strolled into China, unhindered and thrilled. The stars are out; it looks good for tomorrow.

But it is a foggy dawn and the plane does not go. Fate would have us complete the Karakoram Highway by land. We hire a jeep, then meet our Chitrali driver, Pukhton, and head for provisions in the bazaar, an all-male world, where he looks closely after me.

We pass through a scrubby terrain, the Gilgit River joined by the Indus, flowing down from Tibet. Olive and maroon hills close in, then again open, arid, except for scattered fields, bridges, drivers tinkering under broken-down trucks. *Very problem. No spare parts.* We reach Chilas for tea break. *Chitrali people very chai.*

In his wooden stall, a young baker rolls dough, flattening each small mound on a rock, plopping it inside the firepit. Smiling, he removes a hot chappati and hands it to me. Delicious.



We follow the metallic river as the hills rise, touched by first green, nestled at their feet pristine white beaches—truly the “sands of time.” We have entered the Indus Gorge, iron-veined granite of teal and rust through which man has blasted his highway, winding amid crumbling rock and crashing waterfalls. On the road, boys sell fish they have caught from the waters below. Far below.

This is a dark and dramatic land—Kohistan—land of mountains. Its old name is Yaghistan, land of the ungoverned. We are subdued by the forbidding atmosphere, with its stone watchtowers, fortified houses, rough armed men—and nary a woman. We pass a rush of white water, the lush, nala river-valley, Darel. *Very bad people, always firing*, warns our driver. We are trespassers, the KKH itself an intruder, barely tolerated by the living mountain—which threatens to reclaim it, even as we continue our teeth-gritting, eye-popping journey.

The gorge narrows. Perched on sheer green cliffs are isolated houses and fields, goat tracks disappearing in the mist. We bob and weave around vertical rock face, afraid to look down—yet look we must. It is a staggering panorama of immense grandeur, but the dimensions are those of the gods, not man. We feel the shadowy power of this ancient land and are humbled.

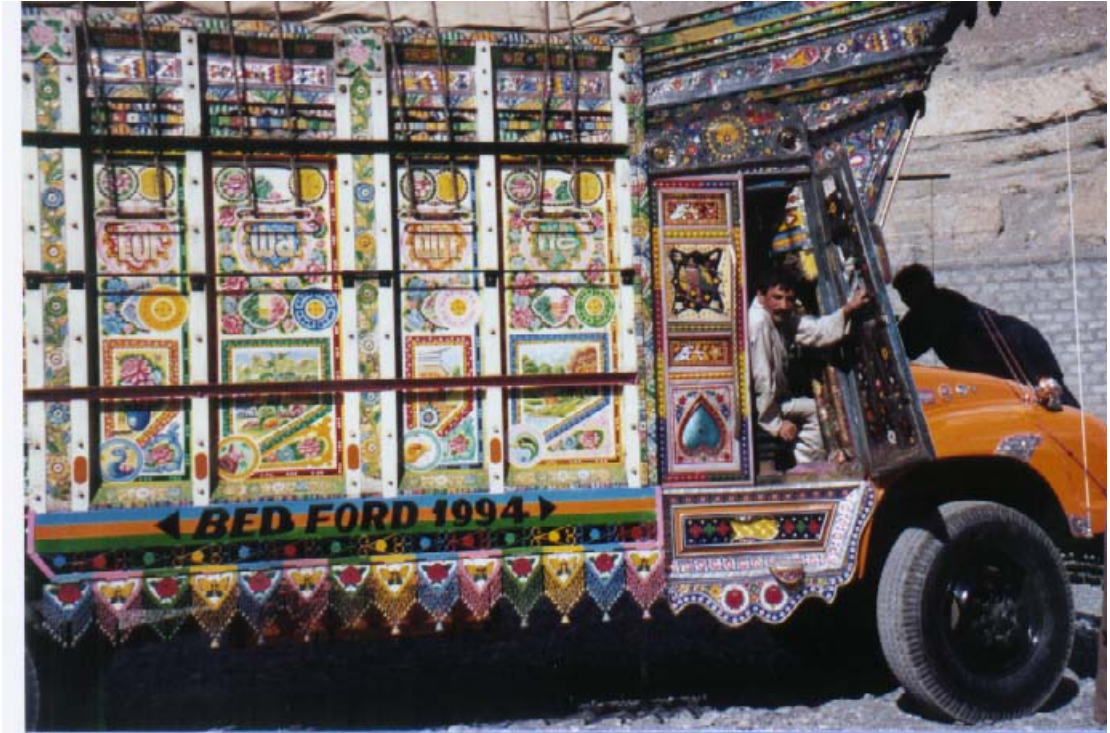
We reach our Besham hotel amid a vivid show of lightning and thunder—an epic storm anywhere else. But here, the extraordinary seems ordinary. We sleep to the pounding rain, the rushing river.

The sky dawns clear. On the far bank, broad swathes of wheat swaying in the fresh breeze, golden in the soft new light. We pass moist, shimmering fields, a barefoot woman leading a water buffalo. Today, cradled under blue, the menace is gone. The highlands fall into emerald terraces sloping gently to the river. Here is a sense of abundance: No need to climb a mountain to eke out your harvest.

Soon the Indus pulls away, broad valleys rising into cedar forests. We ascend and descend, but never with such drama, such passion. Man has tamed this land. We see neat villages, dotted with haystacks and the colors of women. Still, they turn away as we pass, protected behind the veil. We reach Mansehra, where gaily dressed Afghan nomad women herd sheep, the first female faces since China. Villages become towns, two lanes become four, clogged with brilliantly painted Bedford lorries. And the heat returns.



We reach Islamabad, check into the Pearl-Continental and savor our modern comforts. While reflecting on the miraculous, the “unexpected.” Even our unexpected pang at the end of this journey.



If You Go:

Travel along the KKH can begin from either side of the border between May 1 and November 30, depending on the weather. Both countries require visas, easy to obtain. Tours may be arranged through such agencies as InnerAsia in San Francisco, Mountain Travel in El Cerrito, CA (for whom Beek often works), as well as Pamir Tours in Gilgit and Karakoram Tours in Islamabad.

The independent traveler will save money, but must be resourceful and patient. Jeeps in Kashgar are available through China Travel Service, the hotels, John's Cafe or other local entrepreneurs. We hired ours from the Chini Bagh Hotel and paid about \$400 to the border (at 8.6 yuan/dollar), then another \$80 to Gilgit. The flight to Islamabad costs less than the \$200 we paid (at 30 rupees/dollar), but the land route is spectacular. Cheap local buses are also available—you meet people, but can't stop for photos.

In Kashgar, we found the Seman Hotel the best located (about \$30—try to get a rate per room, not person). Rugs are great buys if you have space, old ones in the bazaar or fine new ones in the government emporium. The Sunday Bazaar is not to be missed!

In Gilgit, we were delighted with the Chinar Inn (about \$30).

Bargaining is the rule everywhere—but don't get hung up on haggling over a few cents. People are hospitable to tourists—just ask if you need help. Travelers of both sexes should dress modestly in Pakistan and not point their cameras at local women.

Lonely Planet's *Karakoram Highway* guidebook was invaluable.