

IN SEARCH OF THE KHYBER PASS

By Diana Chambers

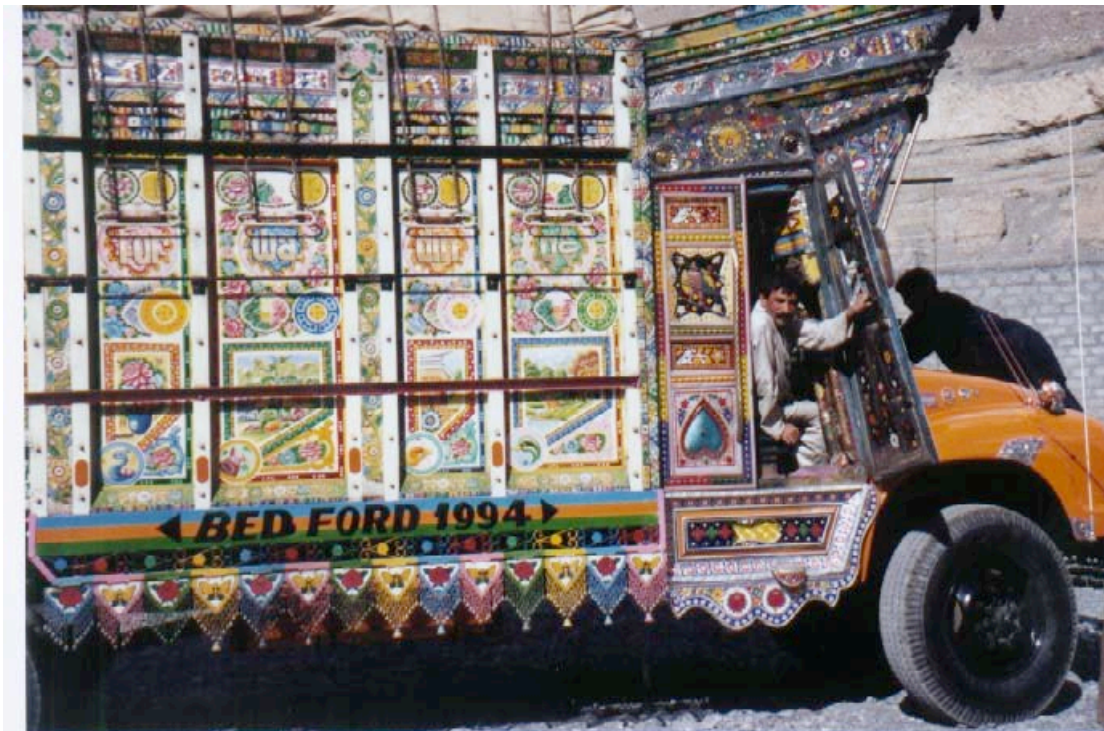
The pilot announces, “*Inshallah*, we will soon be landing in Peshawar, capital of Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province.”

My husband glances at me. “God willing’,” I explain. He rolls his eyes, retightening his seat belt. I smile and shrug. Maybe the best way to approach our visit here is with similar fatalism.

We’ve come to this border town to research a screenplay but are aware of the many difficulties ahead. Although next-door neighbor, Afghanistan, defeated Russia after a ten-year struggle, internal conflicts mar the “peace.” (These conflicts would eventually prepare the ground for the Taliban.) We’ll be a mere thirty miles from the famed Khyber Pass to that remote mountain nation. We’d like to visit the Pass, but hear it is closed to foreigners due to tribal dissension, smuggling, kidnappings and war. It’s not exactly your tranquil holiday.

By the time we taxi from the airport and check into the modern yet cozy Pearl Continental Hotel, our apprehensions dim. They soon fade entirely as we come under the spell of the famous local charm and hospitality. And the food! Heavenly barbequed chicken, fresh baked naan and juicy mangos.

The next morning, we hire a car from the hotel’s transportation desk and shake hands with our tall, easygoing driver, Jhan. He is wearing a beige, long-tailed shirt over matching pants, the national “uniform” that most men seem to favor in muted pale or dark tones. We tell him we want to go to the Khyber Pass. He smiles and says, “*Inshallah*, we will go.”



We set off into the carefree chaos of Peshawar (puh-SHOWER). Traffic this Saturday morning is especially hectic after yesterday's Islamic sabbath. Passing us in joyous lawlessness are psychedelically painted trucks and buses, scooters, bicycles, motor-rickshaws, horse-driven tongas and bullock carts. No vehicle moves without horns beeping, bells ringing and overflowing passengers and cargo.

The people we see, primarily male, are an equally eclectic mix. For thousands of years, this "Frontier Town" has been a melting pot as waves of invaders and traders have passed en route to the riches of India.

Some of the world's oldest archeological finds are here as well as architectural wonders dating back well before Alexander the Great. The water buffaloes especially enjoy the Moghul paradise gardens and water channels.



Soon we're heading west on a busy industrial highway. Leaving the city behind us, we glimpse pearl-gray mountains in the distance as we cross the dusty, golden plains.

Jhan tells us we have entered tribal territory. Tribal territory? He explains, "In parts of North-West Frontier Province, Pakistani government controls only main roads. All other land ruled by local chiefs, paid *baksheesh* to keep peace."

CLANG! The two red gates at the Jamrud checkpoint leading to the Pass slam shut.

Three armed men stride forward, bandoliers crossed over their chests. They are wearing the usual pajama-like attire, only the red badges on their dark caps denoting their official status.

Trying not to be intimidated, we ask if we might please continue on to the Pass.

The leader informs us that we cannot proceed without “special permission,” explaining in an apologetic manner that this is a *Pakistani* rule, not their own. They are Pathans, tribal police.

Dejected, we take a few Polaroid pictures before turning back. The guards are curious and one of them, Hassan, cocky in his smiling arrogance, insists on selecting the best for himself. We chat a bit, then Farouk, the quiet leader, invites us to take some food with them. Although intrigued, I decline, unwilling to impose and knowing my husband’s obsession with hygienics. Hospitably, he presses us, “Some tea?”



Impulsively, I accept, despite the husband’s raised eyebrows. Perhaps this will be our entree to the Pass. Farouk sends a boy for tea then takes us to a lean-to attached to the guard shack. We sit facing them on *charpoys*, wooden frame beds with hemp webbing.

Bolsters are provided, and like pashas we recline, cooled by a gentle warm breeze, sheltered from the heat and dust.

Our hosts are charming and seem fascinated with me. In this culture, an unveiled western woman is viewed by men as intriguing yet disturbing. Gallantry and sexuality become inextricably mixed in their behavior.

The boy arrives with tea. As host, Farouk pours a small amount from the pot into a cup, swirls it around, then pours it ceremoniously from one cup to another. The green tea, *qehwa*, is mild and delicious. Sugar is a sign of hospitality. The more sugar, the more honor to the guest. Ours is very sweet.

As we relax with our tea, the gates open continuously for overloaded cars, buses and trucks. Each is more imaginatively decorated than the last with flowers, animals, alpine scenes and valiant warriors.

A truckload of camels pulls up. A young boy hops out and approaches the chief with a piece of paper. Farouk studies it gravely, then nods, making a notation in his long gray ledger.

With a quiet smile, Farouk points out that even the camels need special permission, then advises us to go to NWFP (North-West Frontier Province) Headquarters to apply for ours. Amid profuse thanks and gracious replies of “Most welcome,” we part.

Jhan drives us to an imposing stone compound. Two formidable armed guards give us the once-over, *twice*, before letting us through the ten-foot iron gates. We follow Jhan as we’re sent upstairs and downstairs in search of the Home Secretary.

Eventually, we reach the office of an “Additional Secretary.” The tiny room houses three clerks as well. A massive floor fan stirs the papers, not the heat. The Additional Secretary, Mr. Nawaz Khan, makes the most of his authority. Staring implacably at my husband, he says, “The Pass is closed to foreign tourists—for their own protection.”

“But we’re not tourists. We’re here to research a movie.”

Misunderstanding, he informs us that photography is forbidden in the Pass. We promise to take no photographs. Grudgingly, he hands us an application. After we complete the form, he takes it, promising to forward it to his superior, the Home Secretary.

We explain we must leave in three days. He says a message will be left at our hotel.

Seeing our disappointment as we walk out, Jhan makes a suggestion. He’ll take us somewhere else very good for our movie. Where? He smiles mysteriously. Intrigued, we agree. It is very hot

The rutted road south of town is lined with willow and poplar trees, neat green and gold fields. The land is majestic yet timeless. I point my camera out the window. Jhan steps on the gas.

He hisses nervously, “We will be shot if men see us making pictures of their women!”

I protest that I saw no women. Still disturbed, he warns, “Tribal country!” as if warning enough.



Interspersed with mud-walled tribal settlements are tented Afghan refugee camps. Children play, animals scavenge, while brightly-dressed women carry food and water, veils secured by their teeth. Few men are here, just as in town there are few women—and those that must go out are carefully concealed under *chadors*, long body shawls, or *burqas*, full-length gowns with narrow latticed openings at eye level. They are invisible, sheltered behind the intensely private walls of tradition.

The local men are altogether another story—their powerful physicality cannot be escaped. They move with easy confidence and grace, speak with bravado and look you in the eye with a smile. Their great heroes are warriors and poets: they see no contradiction between the two. In a land where every man owns a gun, it's equally common to see two brawny six-footers walking hand in hand. This is a man's world.

We reach a dusty village, Darra. Its unpaved main street is lined with tiny shops, filled with swaggering armed males. We soon realize this “typical” market town is really a bustling arms bazaar. The Old West with turbans instead of cowboy hats.



We jump at the sound of a machine gun. Jhan laughs. Customers are allowed to sample the merchandise as long as they pay for the ammunition. Everywhere the colors are bright, the designs whimsical, belying what should be a sinister atmosphere. It's like a carnival town—you expect to see popcorn and cotton candy for sale instead of deadly weapons.



We follow Jhan cautiously across the road, trying not to dive for cover. Ahead we see “Gul Akbar and Sons, Arms Dealers,” as announced by a multilingual sign emblazoned with the green Pakistani flag rising from a blue globe next to a shiny black automatic weapon.

Jhan introduces us to Sher Akbar, the owner’s brother. I notice his missing index finger as he gestures expansively, proclaiming, “You can buy every weapon here! And not only original but authentic local copy at much more reasonable rate—quality guaranteed!” He explains that this region has specialized in the reproduction of weapons for over a hundred years, the art of gunmaking passed from father to son.

Three serious young men enter to inspect a shiny steel dagger with carved ivory handle. They test its sharpness, size and weight. Akbar names a price; the men make a counter-offer. Akbar acts insulted, laughing as they shrug and move off down the street. They’ll be back, he assures us with supreme confidence.

Later after exploring the town, we pass the three young men sauntering toward Akbar’s shop.



As we drive away, I reflect on what we've seen. It's difficult to reconcile the charm and dignity of Darra's people with their deadly business, their *thriving* deadly business. While it's true the local preoccupation with weapons has a cultural, historical basis, nonetheless it saddens me.

We return to the hotel, but there's no message from the Additional Secretary.

Nor is there word the next morning.

We take a hair-raising, knuckle-gripping, eye-popping motor-rickshaw ride to the jewelry bazaar where my husband people-watches while I bargain hard for bronze bangles and amber beads. Nearby a water buffalo cools off.

But no "special permission" awaits us on our return.

Too soon, it's time to leave. We wait for Jhan to take us to the airport. His car screeches to a halt in front of the hotel. He jumps out, triumphantly waving a piece of paper—our permit! I want to hug him and burst into tears at the same time. It's too late now. I study the paper with a long face all the way there. It's an impressive document with stamps and many signatures, valid today only.

"*Inshallah,*" Jhan says, "we will go together next time."

IF YOU GO:

The Pearl Continental Hotel, Khyber Road. Tel: 76361-9. International class, all facilities. About US\$60/night dbl.

Dean's Hotel, Islamia Road. Tel: 76481-3. Bungalows, garden, some rooms air-conditioned. About US\$40/night dbl.

Plane connections from Karachi and Islamabad via Pakistan International Airlines, which offers high-level service and security.

The food here is milder than India, with grilled specialities. Stellar food and service at the Pearl Continental. Try Lala's Grill on Shahrah-e-Pehlavi for local atmosphere.

Spring and fall are lovely and temperate, winter is crisp, summer is hot.

The Old City Bazaar is not to be missed. Buddhist, Mogul, Sikh and British ruins are to be found throughout the city and its environs. Whether in the Peshawar Museum, city or countryside, a sense of the past is all-pervasive.

The people are warm and hospitable with a lively sense of humor. Female travelers will want to dress conservatively—and males, too, for that matter.

All quoted rates are, of course, subject to change.