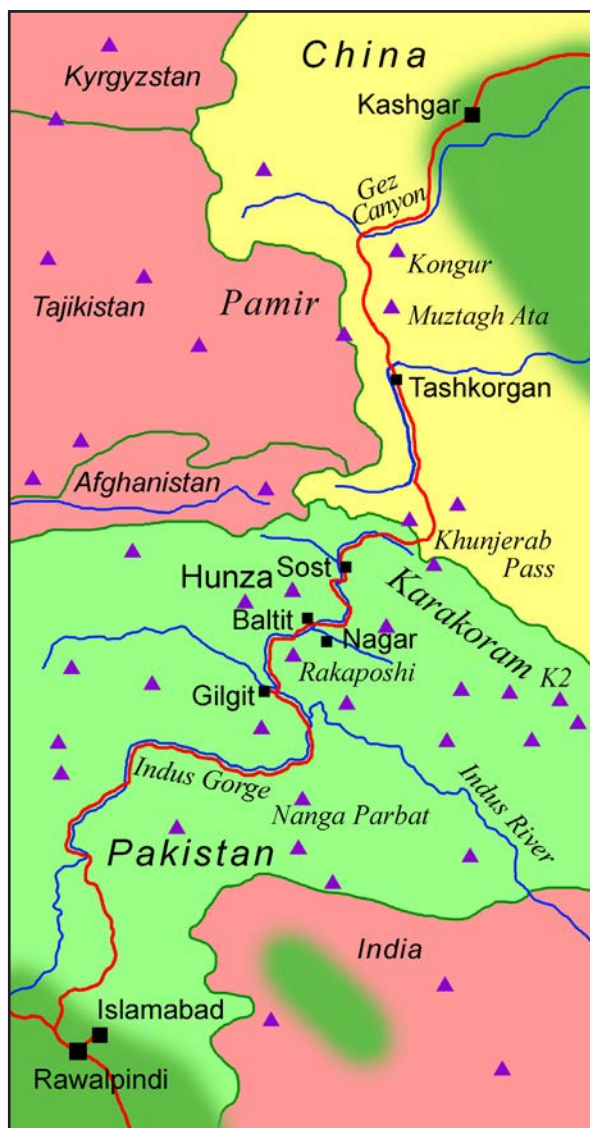


Silk Road journey, via Kashgar and the Karakoram

Diary of a journey in 1988 by land across China and over into Pakistan



Karakoram Highway.

Plane window view of the Karakoram.

For the summer of 1988, I decided to go off on a grand travel adventure with Number One Son, Sam, to see something of the world during his summer break from university. I thought up two plausible options. One was to follow a chunk of the ancient Silk Road with a journey from Beijing to Rawalpindi. The other was a jaunt around Botswana, where a good friend, Hans Friederich, was then working and could be a great starting point. Sam chose the Silk Road.

The ends of the journey were dictated by the availability of plane tickets. Pakistan International Airways had daily flights from London to Islamabad, and a weekly connecting flight from Islamabad to Beijing. A return ticket London to Beijing was by far the cheapest option, and in those days one could just ignore the booked return flight from Beijing and pick it up in Islamabad, without some wretched computer cancelling the second leg after a no-show on the first leg. Then it was just a matter of finding trains and buses to get from Beijing to Islamabad in good time. That was what we did.



Route across China.



Saturday June 25, flight

Trains from Nottingham to Heathrow for the PIA flight, which was delayed for an hour until 1515. Excellent seats on the 747, row 11 with window and aisle at exit so acres of space. Via Paris for a one-hour stop. Then no views over cloud, and dark before Turkey.

Sunday June 26, flights

Dawn over the Hindu Kush and then the scarps of the Siwaliks. Into Islamabad at 0630, and late, so rushed through terminal for boarding cards and onto another 747 for 0730 departure to Beijing. Up through haze and dust, but then beautiful views of Karakoram mountains. Fly close to some high peaks, and K2 is recognisable in the distance. Then out over the great plateau of Tibet with haze that increased to cloud.

Into Beijing at 5pm. Small airport and simple formalities, then we are first out. Hotel booking office is handy, but many hotels are full. We get a room in Nanhua Hotel for 100Y (6.4Y = £1). Take airport bus into CAAC city terminal; usual erratic driving, and Sam impressed by the numbers of bicycles. Then trolley bus (10f each) across town to Tiantan Park, and walk through a maze of hutongs to the hotel. Poor room, and went to Beiwei Hotel for good beef dinner. Sam somewhat disturbed by the squalor of the hutongs, the lack of space and the lack of light.

Monday June 27, Beijing

Up at 8 for good western breakfast, and changed room to one that had a loo that worked, our own bathroom, a TV that worked, air-con, and bedside switches including one labelled “don’t bother”.

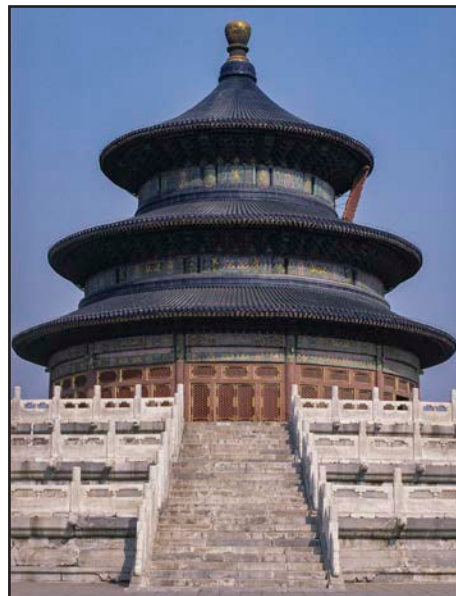
Took bus to main railway station. Easy with a new ticket hall for foreigners in the back of the international waiting room; only two short queues, but then tickets only available for July 1st, so we take two hard sleeper berths to Turfan for 165Y each.

Took metro for 20f each to Qianmen, and walked up though Tiananmen Square, reduced to 400x600m now that Mao’s tomb takes a chunk. Lots of Chinese taking photos of each other. Walk to huge Beijing Hotel, too touristy but good for stamps and Carlsberg. No CITS (travel bureau) there, so walk through hutongs, taking photos, to Chongwenmen Hotel with CITS office. Tours to Badaling are 90Y, and to Mutianyu are only for Chinese. So metro to Qianmen, and find tiny street booth with tour tickets to Changcheng (Great Wall) at Mutianyu, so we book for tomorrow. Next door is Kentucky Fried Chicken which Sam reckons is a winner with no queues and just 6Y for a decent meal.

Walk through Qianmen shop, not very inspiring. Change some 100 FEC to 140 RMB on the street (FEC are foreign exchange certificates that bank supplies and can buy foreign goods; RMB, renminbi, are real money that are useful in local shops where they have never seen FEC). Buy green tea and bottle opener, then to Beiwei Hotel shop for cokes (with RMB) and Nescafe (with FEC). Only fruit on street stalls are apricots, bananas and water melons (and a pile of cucumbers squished by a truck that had driven over them). Back to hotel for excellent dinner of pork, bamboo, chicken, chillies, peanuts, with coke all for 25Y.



Through a hutong in Beijing.



Qinian Good Harvest Temple.



Inside the Forbidden City, now known as the Gugong, with enormous blocks of carved marble down the emperor's stairway.

Tuesday June 28, Great Wall

Up at 6.30 and walk through light rain to Qianmen for 7.30 tour bus. Thought we were going to Mutianyu, but ended up at Badaling; still OK as cost only 10Y each, instead of 90Y at CITS. Bus had 48 Chinese, us and one Brazilian. Two hours to Badaling, up new road, then two hours there. Very touristy now at road level, but the wall itself remains clear of any tat, and is still a great sight. Good walk west to summer tower, with one very steep section; too hazy for photos. Back down old road, past gate and other walls, and the Great Wall is still in ruins 2 km west of Badaling. Down to plains and cafe for rice and veg for 2Y with cheap beer; locals on the bus friendly and helpful with times etc.

Then to Ming Tombs Dam, with celebratory monument but still no water in the reservoir; major works in progress sealing a sinkhole beneath the alluvium, and a long grout curtain 100 m from the dam. Dingling Tomb for walkabout, and into Changling Hall with its massive timbers for an extra 3Y. Back to Beijing through heavy and chaotic traffic. Day was not what we planned, but probably the best after all, and Sam thought it good. Dinner in KFC cos cheaper than hotel, but had to pay in FEC because we had no white card (permit to use RMB). Was a good day.

Wednesday June 29, Forbidden City

Up late at 10, after late night watching News in English on TV. Bus up through town and walk through hutongs to Tiananmen. Into the Gugong / Forbidden City / Imperial Palace Museum for 5Y each. Splendid buildings and courtyards, lots of carved marble (one block of 250 ton, 16 metres long, hauled in from the mountains), gardens of tufa and karren blocks. Central area dominated by ceremonial throne rooms, for birthdays, New Year and for meeting protocol staff (!!). In old living quarters for 6000 servants, jewellery museum mostly just bad taste, some large blocks of carved jade. Out to Beijing Hotel for drinks in comfort. Gugong was good for 4 hours, but no more. Bus back across town in chaotic traffic and the first watery sun of the day. Excellent dinner of pork and bamboo in hotel.

Thursday June 30, Beijing

An unplanned fourth day in town. Walk to Tiantan Park, large and pleasant. Views of misty horizons from top of giant debris hill created when underground civil defence units were built. Imperial Vault of Heaven not spectacular, then pineapple and lychees for lunch. Walk up grand drive to Qianian, the Good Harvest Temple; perhaps the best building in Beijing with massive timbers, no nails, well painted, on marble plinth; relaxing without Gugong crowds.

Bus up to Chang'an, then walk through hutongs, past major construction site for new hotel, then to Friendship Store to buy tinned fruit and drinks for train. Buses back to hotel and another good dinner despite power cut.

Friday July 1, Yellow Plain

Breakfast of bread and eggs then check out of hotel. Crowded trolley bus through heavy traffic to Chongonwen, then metro to train station, and its teeming hordes, but peace in the International Waiting Room (even though our far-west train was not leaving China). Onto train at 1130, not yet full. We have the best - two middle berths, away from the radio and TV. Old guy below Sam, and two women on top bunks two metres up. Stack the



Gobi Desert from the train window.

Hard sleeper accommodation with Sam on his middle berth.

bags on rack above the corridor and start to get organised for our three-day ride. Sam reckons that it is alright, because the bunk is just long enough for him to stretch out to sleep.

Featureless landscapes across the Yellow Plain; a few steam engines along the way. Buy buns, nuts and beer at one station, then at 7.30 walk down train to dining car for an OK dinner of eggs, tomatoes, beans, pork, spam, rice and soup with beer and a good apple drink. Into darkness at Zhengzhou. Train now full, fans would be welcome, too many Chinese smoking.

Saturday July 2, Loess Lands

A hot night at first because fans were not working, but cooled down later. Needed the sheet, but no blanket. Waken in loess terrain, then into Xian with station beside impressive wall 12 metres high that surrounds the old city. Sunny morning up wide valley, then spectacular sandstone cliffs into the Wei He gorge, with loess above. New road being built on far bank; extensive river defences; numerous cave houses, many still in use. Further west becomes higher and colder, with classic loess gullies and pillars; beautiful in sunlight. Not much paddy, some dry rice, more corn, beans and blue cornflowers.

Train life OK except for one 'orrible little boy; other children are very sweet. Noodles in big cups are popular, but we buy a 2Y box of rice, veg, egg and bacon that is very good to share for lunch; we have plenty to drink, and our nuts and biscuits. Through Lanzhou at 7.40pm, huge city, large station, still high sun as we are on Beijing time. Came in beside Huang He (Yellow River), entrenched in rock by 20 metres with flood marks at over 8 metres; fast, shallow, brown, muddy, water with no boats. Train is steam-hauled out of Lanzhou, with a long slow climb into darkness, and excellent box dinners to keep us going.

Sunday July 3, Gobi Desert

Wake in morning to Mongolian grasslands. Extensive irrigation and cultivation; rice, barley, sheep and a few oxen to carry loads. A few new tar roads with little traffic; lots of bicycles and many trains. Snow-capped Qilian Shan off to south, and plains open out on north. One sand sea some kilometres across beneath a huge alluvial fan into basin. Polystyrene boxes strewn along trackside are the new form of pollution. Out into bleaker desert, still mountains to south, and railway traverses huge alluvial fans. Peasants by trackside gathering coal as dust and chips, a few lonely shepherds, and even more lonely railway signalmen (or girls).

Jiayuguan is large city with steel works and massive smoke pollution, then just beyond is the large restored fort at the end of the Great Wall. Still a busy railway, with waiting trains in every loop along the single track. Train now diesel-hauled and faster than behind steam locos. Large dry lake beds, but also irrigation water in covered concrete channels from distant mountains. Then out into endless, nearly flat, stony desert with just a



Snow-capped mountains of the Qilian Shan, along the southern margin of the Gobi Desert.

few dunes. Some flocks of sheep, a few goats, horses, donkeys, cows and Bactrian camels. ‘Devoted to You’ on the train speakers, but in Chinese and not by the Everly Brothers.

Dusk at 10.30pm because still on Beijing time, and the last six hours have been across a Gobi Desert that is amazingly barren. Thin mineral soil, bare rock, projecting ridges, less plant cover than anywhere (except top of Etna, says Sam), with just euphorbias and sage bushes. No habitation except along railway, where isolated terraces of very small ‘houses’ at each passing loop, for an incredibly bleak life. Train has 16 coaches, with 32 soft berths, 300 hard berths, >1000 hard seats and plenty standing. It livens up with some singing, and endless card games. No other westerners since we left Xian.

Through Liuyuan in middle of night. The station for Dunhuang, which could have been good to visit for its desert dunes and cave art, except that it would have added two days and could have been a nightmare getting a decent train onwards to Turfan. So decided to give it a miss.

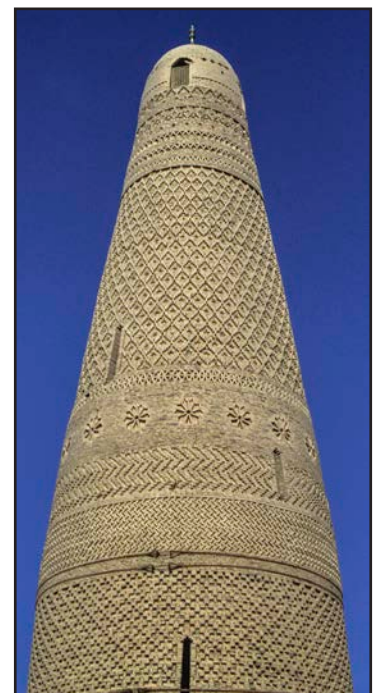
Monday July 4, Turfan

Dawn soon after 7.00 with lovely views of snow peaks along the Tien Shan above a belt of giant alluvial fans traversed by the railway. Deep gullies, some entrenched by 40 metres and still active, and over-sized floodplains that are less active but with thorough flood defences. Almost no habitation, one industrial eye-sore, and even a few birds on the wing.

Into Dahoyan at 9am, a real dump with station signs only in Chinese and Arabic, with no more pinyin now that we are in Xinjiang, the land of the Uighurs, but coach commandant returns our tickets, so we know that we have to get off. Out of station into square, where hawkers try to fill a bus to Kashgar. Walk up through amazingly unattractive town to bus station, where ticket office is closed. Soon a tout arrives and herds us all onto a Turfan bus that is already full, for a crowded one-hour ride (for 1Y40 each) down huge alluvial fan, where many bits of road washed out.



Market in Turfan.



The minaret of Emin Mosque.

Turfan is classic Asian town: dusty, hot, brown, horses, carts, chaos, colourful clothes. This is central Asia, not China. On signs, Chinese names are second to Uighur/Arabic. But stops in centre, close to Binguan where twin room with air con and bath is 60Y; not bad and good to have some comfort. Meet travellers coming from Pakistan, and prospects look good. CITS is little use, but learn that bus direct to Kashgar is available, and shorter than from Urumqi, so we decide on an extra day in Turfan and skip Urumqi.

Walk down main street with Islamic architecture. then through colourful bazaar, out past the donkey cart traders to bus station. Buy tickets for Thursday, 38Y each to Kashgar, so should be there for the big Sunday market. Walk back through side streets with houses of mud-and-straw bricks; some cloud, and very hot when the sun comes out. Good banana slush-puppies in bazaar, and bought superb honeydew melon for 60f (10p).

Beer at hotel where the courtyard is a great meeting place for travellers. Dinner in hotel 3Y or 5Y set menus with spiced vegetables, noodles, rice and lamb kebab. Cloud and thunder, but no rain; for a few hours in the afternoon, sun was very hot. Because still on Beijing time, daylight lasts until after 10pm.

Tuesday July 5, Gaochang and Bezeklik

We continue to be amazed by incredible inefficiency, with excess people sitting around, but nobody when you want something. So many empty, knackered and underused buildings, especially grandiose government offices. Also folk into the Arab habit of walling a plot of land with nothing in it.

Up at 8am for breakfast of melon and pineapple, then out to a cloudy morning. Tien Shan wreathed in cloud, so maybe right not to have gone to Urumqi. At hotel gate minibus drivers unhelpful and could not find anyone to share, so negotiated for the long half-day trip east for 80Y with the minibus to ourselves. Out of town and straight into totally barren desert on mega-fans. After 40 km, turn off through desperately scruffy village to Gaochang, the lost city of the Karakhoja kingdom astride the Silk Road 2000 years ago. Well sited below active wadi. Extensive remains of houses, some larger temples and fields, all inside a wall 4 km long, 10 m high and 5 m thick. A monumental construction. Walkabout for an hour in flat light. Underground Astana Tombs had a sullen girl as guide, some wall paintings and two preserved bodies of questionable antiquity.



The beautiful wadi at Bezeklik, with the restored buildings along the fronts of the many painted caves excavated into its wall.

Weathered remnants of house walls within Gaochang, an abandoned desert town on the ancient Silk Road town.

Then up a spectacular escarpment wadi with lovely views of river and Xinzhenquo ghost town. Continued up side wadi with huge terrace remnants, blowing sand and isolated farms. Bezeklik Caves carved into wadi wall of mudstone, all spruced up with good access to dramatic site; some good surviving paintings on roofs and walls. On way back walk across desert to a tiny salt spring with waters claimed as beneficial to the skin. Cloud timed itself well, as only 100°F but extremely dry. Back to Turfan after a good excursion.

Cold beer and Vimto are winners at 2.30, then rest through the heat afternoon eat. At 6pm, go walkabout via the department stores: amazing lack of displays, excess of assistants and chaos; four floors in one store, but top one half-empty, and shoes on every floor. Ghetto-blasters for £50 on two floors, between lorry inner tubes and soap on one. Furniture piled up, dresses in random ranks, bolts of cloth with the only smiling assistant.

At 9pm go to new tourist hotel for dinner. Luxury at 15Y each for three meats, four veg, nuts, eggs, kebabs, chapatti, rice and sweet oranges. Everyone else in tour groups from Japan and Germany. Walk back through town for 10.30 sunset, with loudspeakers playing on every corner – shades of Big Brother or a leftover from times of no radio or TV? Hotel crowded with new Japanese arrivals. End of a good day.

Wednesday July 6, Turfan

Breakfast of bottled oranges after major battle to open the jar. Walk east to Emin Mosque; site abandoned so could enter and view from the roof; minaret has fine ornamental brickwork only 200 years old. Then wander out of town along back roads past vineyards and through farm country. Children and donkeys everywhere, men making mud-and-straw bricks, irrigation channels, bread ovens. A great walk.

Back to Turfan bazaar for excellent late lunch of hot chapattis straight from the oven, iced fruit-drink, banana and nan. Buy sultanas for bus trip. Amusing holes in the road over collapsed drains. Cloudless day and noticeably hotter. Evening walk round north end of town, past many new buildings and a swimming pool, then to new hotel for dinner, but full of tour groups and not as good as previous night. Back to our hotel, where display of Uighur music and dance in progress.

Thursday July 7, Tien Shan

Up early and at bus station for 8am, but bus goes at 10am because on 'standard' time instead of Beijing summer time. Total chaos to get on bus; weigh baggage, then stack it on roof; then huge fight to get on bus, but Sam is first and gets the two front seats with lots of legroom, though on south side. Asian chaos over ticket inspection, so departure delayed. And it rains for two minutes; Turfan's annual rainfall is 15 mm, with 3000 mm of potential evaporation. On the bus are 6 Japanese, 4 Germans, us, about 40 Uighur locals and no Han Chinese.

Road goes out into desert, then loops round to bazaar town of Taksun at lowest point near basin floor 150 metres below sea level. Then long climb up alluvial fans and bus shows its age; radiator water is syphoned out of a tank in the cab; this also houses small boy whose job is to prod the driver to keep him awake on the very long drives. Continue on dirt road, with many wash-outs, up wild wadi cut into the Tien Shan. Superb trip, up



The road up into the Tien Shan.



The excellent truck-stop at Luntai.



to 1800 metres, no vegetation, steep cliffs in turbidites with many dolerite dykes. Then freewheel down into the Kumux basin where road-stop for drinks, optional food, melon and disgusting Chinese loo.

Over more hills with granite and mineralisation, and then remain at 1200 metres where it is cooler. The next huge basin has extensive irrigated farmland and the town of Yanqi, which has a major industry binding reeds into rope and fencing. Many small villages with zero appeal amid miserable squalor, and Sam is convinced there is a local enthusiasm for lobotomy. Another granite ridge, then large town of Korla, with much new industry and underused railway ending in a factory zone. Shed and collect some local passengers, and aggro at checkpoint where a Chinese official objects to the locals being on board.

Road continues out into more desert, with mountains still on north side feeding water to cropped areas below pediment fans. Some 50 km on, and soon after dark, drive into a compound where we are the first bus in. A fight again for bits of paper bought with 5Y each for beds in rooms of four with a few mosquitoes. Very basic, with hard beds and duvets, but we sleep under just the bottom sheets. Bus is due to leave after seven hours, and the acute shortage of drinks does not help.

Friday July 8, eastern Taklimakan

Up before 7am in darkness, then wait 20 minutes for loading the bus and we set off with the dawn. Very rough road at first with two crashed trucks and passing wells being drilled, across desert with many washes from mountains on north side. On our left, to the south, complete emptiness of the Taklimakan Desert; its name means 'Go in and you won't come out'. Some areas greener with sage brush.

Stop at Luntai oasis for drinks and eats; many good meat and veg stalls making it an excellent truck stop, but noodles not rice. Also stop at bazaar town of Kuqa, but no mosques in any of these desert towns. Various pick-ups, then Kuqa bus station has cans of Coke and good lemonade as a sudden burst of luxury.

Onward past area of marshes and lakes, then low hills of folded sandstone, and still many modern irrigation systems. Huge argument on the bus, with all the locals involved; one man thrown off, then 100 metres on we stop and wait for him; organisation of ticketing is clueless. Clouds still hang on the Tien Shan to north of us in this spell of rather unusual weather; we hear from the Germans that Tianchi (the mountain destination near Urumqi) was cloudy and cold.

Above: Taklimakan.

Below: Aksu.



Very long barren stretch of desert, more salt flats, and some dunes. Then over low hills and down into Aksu oasis. But we stop at new bus station and road hotel some kilometres before town. Rooms for three at 8Y (payable in FEC!), better than previous, but it really is just a modern dump. Fifty rooms in one block, with washrooms on each corridor, but loos are across the unlit courtyard that has a large hole midway over a collapsed drain as a fun night-time hazard. Lousy restaurant with cold rice, no meat, weird mushrooms, but eggs and tomatoes are OK. Fizzy wine, and then a tin of pineapple. Altogether close to rock-bottom.



Desert road.

Saturday July 9, western Taklimakan

Up at 7 as instructed, but then wait an hour and a half for the bus to leave. Total chaos, driver is late, then people are on the wrong bus; 12 buses in the yard, with gates locked until 7.15. Shortly pass through town of Aksu, with large modern buildings totally out of character in the desert, but rivers just beyond bring plenty of water for irrigation. The Tarim is the key river, but loses water all the way, and then dies in the Lop Nor depression.

Then out into the desert, very bleak, fine scarps to the north, but totally flat desert to the south. A few crows, one large raptor, trucks and buses, donkey carts in middle of nowhere hours away from any town. One slow section where 'road' being rebuilt. Just lots of desert until Sanchakou truck-stop with usual compound and usual dire loos. Not much food on offer; Sam has plate of noodles.

Then off into more desert, impressive by its emptiness. Just the odd isolated house with zero appeal. Scatter of oases across the playa, and one lake with little around it. A yoghurt stop in the middle of nowhere. Then crowds cram onto the bus, arriving out of empty desert, but then all get off at the incongruous modern town of Artushih. Final run across low scarplands then long descent into broad Kashgar basin. The oasis town has quarter of a million residents.

Bus stops near edge of town and we share a horse-drawn taxi (there are no other taxis; and very few local buses that we saw) with the four Germans on long ride round the back streets (horses are not allowed into town centre most of the time, hence many scams by taxi drivers who are nearly all crooks) to Seman Hotel, which seems to be the standard travellers' place. We arrive at 9pm, for usual check-in chaos, then a room for 30Y, basic, not very clean, but with a hot shower. Good dinner, though only over-priced Pepsi or Laoshan Cola (= Vimto), and bizarre but enthusiastic waitress service in courtyard bar with daylight until midnight. Great to have made it to the fabled Kashgar; lots of points in the Travellers' I-Spy book.

Sunday July 10, Kashgar Sunday market

Up at 9.00, which was very early, because dawn is after 8.00 because still on Beijing summer time. Long walk through town to the site of the weekly market on far side of the river. This is reckoned to be the greatest market in Asia, with 50,000 folk coming in, many from neighbouring countries. On way there we find the first-ever clean Chinese public loo, paying 5f, and issued with two sheets of paper but no more.



On the way to the Sunday Market in Kashgar.

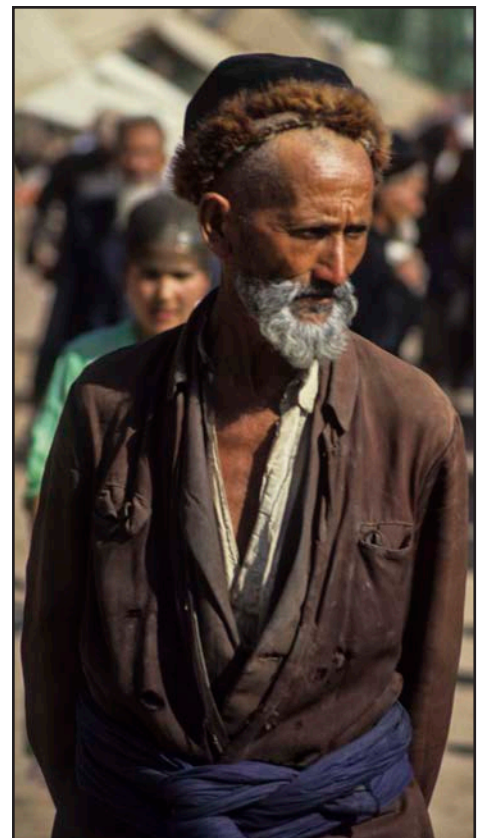
Arrive at market to find vast area selling everything. Big clothing section first, then radios, then medical with a doctor doing a very dubious operation on a man's foot (all in the open air of course), a dentist (with a drill driven by foot-treadle, though with no patients). Then huge food market; many vegetables looking good, apricots, plums, but no oranges or grapes; very dubious meat section with heads, brains, offal of goats mainly. Large timber and reed section, then pass donkey park (no need for a car park) and round to the animal market. This is the original bazaar on the bank of the river, all in penned area 300 by 100 metres, surrounded by stalls with endless hot tea but no cold drinks. Many horses, donkeys,

cattle, goats, sheep crosses and just three Bactrian camels. Horses ridden at speed up and down centre on trial runs; sheep and goats sheared on request. Great characters wearing heavy coats, straight down from the mountains; no problems with photos. Locked gates with tiny gaps create main chaos. We buy some RMB (at 150 for 100 FEC).

Out past large saddlers' area with everything you can think of on sale. Blacksmiths making axes, hoes and ploughshares in small coal furnaces with electric pump blowers and tempering in buckets of water. Heat of the day drives us out at 2pm, still tired after the bus trip, but we had seen the best of this dusty mega-experience that is an Asian classic. On way back find OK beers and Chinese Cola, Then through town centre with mosques and local bazaars. Jewellery is of poor quality but we buy a silver bracelet for Meg. Take a pony-cart back to the hotel for a late lunch. Sadly the Germans had gone to the wrong bazaar, just a small, daily, local one, so had missed the grand event.

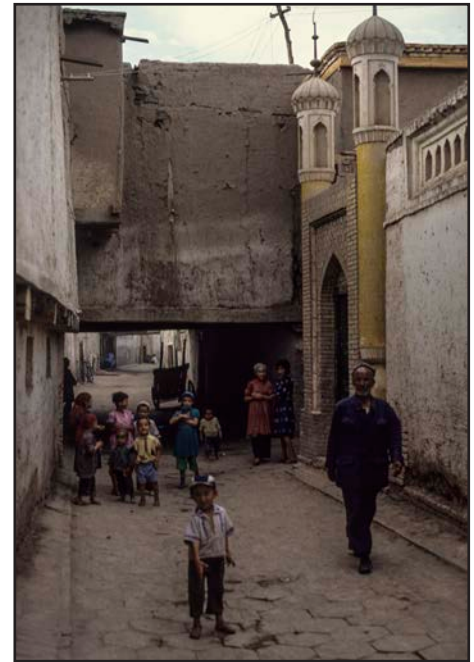


Scenes at the great Sunday Market, reckoned to be the largest in Asia, held on the river plain outside of Kashgar.





The very large Id Kah Mosque in the centre of Kashgar.



In the old quarter of Kashgar.

Later walkabout to Mao's statue and long-distance bus-station. Tickets for Sost (in Pakistan) posted at 74Y, but nobody at booking office. So resort to John's Cafe, which seems to have cornered the travellers' ticket market. Local women have complete face covering with open-weave towels that they manage to see through; lots of friendly kids in back streets; swimming pool with a boat-wreck and excessive rubbish; some side roads bridged over by houses. Call in Friendship Hotel near Chinibagh, where excellent cafe and bar with western food and drink, and lots of Pakistani traders staying there. Have good kebabs, veg, nan, cold beer, real Coke, cheaper than Seman. Enquire about large natural arch, but nobody knows it (later find that it is 'Shipton's Arch' and is a major trek to reach). Back to hotel to cool bottles of boiled water ready for next day.

Monday July 11, Kashgar oasis

Up at 9.00, and round to Oasis Hotel next door to rent bicycles at 6Y each for the day. Fairly knackered bikes, but very pleasant to be out and moving about. Through town and past Sunday Market site, deserted except for a small food market. Out to Abak Hoja Tomb, crude Islamic style, many tombs in run-down gardens. Further out eastwards into country, biblical scenes of ploughing fields, herding goats, threshing barley on dusty loess terraces (with some good piping development) above green valley floors. Poplar trees give welcome shade, and we buy slices of melon.



Herding goats along a track in the Kashgar oasis.

Back into town amid the horse-drawn taxis and numerous donkey wagons in from the country. Call at Post Office for stamps, and use the communal glue pot to stick them onto postcards; also check the Poste Restante, but no letter with Sam's results. Cycle through metalworkers' bazaar and out to Friendship Hotel for lunch; apple pie, excellent ice cream, Cokes, kebabs and salad, and Dire Straits playing over speakers. Then back to Seman and John's Cafe for bus tickets; no problem because he is an agent and still only 80Y each.

Then on bikes again out northwards. Call by department store, much better than Turfan, but girl would not serve sweets on counter three metres from her chair, but just said 'meiyou' and sat there doing nothing. Eventually buy biscuits and Chinese Smarties. Cycle out past brickworks and farm country, then a really isolated village. Take photos of kids, and give them each Smarties for thankyou presents, then suddenly surrounded by all their fathers, suspicious because they have never seen Smarties. Long attempts at explanations about where we come from and where we bought them, fortunately in Chinese and not in Uighur, then I eat a Smartie to make everyone happy, and the kids eat theirs. Check out bazaars and cinema on the way back, Coke floats at the Friendship, and return the bicycles, with usual struggle to recover the deposits, but patience wins.

Tuesday July 12, Kashgar

Lazy morning, with excellent nan and honey for breakfast. Walkabout through town, and we find a way into the old quarter, inside sections of surviving wall 10 m high and 5 m thick; maze of narrow streets, with many dead-ends and houses bridging over them; cool, fascinating but sometimes confusing. Amazing number of young kids with diarrhoea. Call by post office, but still no results letter for Sam, then long walk out to Kashgar Binguan, way beyond Sunday Market site, but a barracks of no appeal. Back through town and bazaars, and buy a blue Kashgar hat of the style worn by most of the local men. Friendship Hotel for good drinks and eats. Then walk back in darkness, past open-air cinema that had a noisy Kungfu film starting at midnight.

Wednesday July 13, Pamirs

Up at 8.00 and inevitable hassle with horse-taxis to get across town but still have a long walk to the bus station, arriving soon after 9.00 for a 10.30 bus. Soon sent outside with a guide who is going to the bus, and picks up his bicycle! Long walk then we realise that we are heading for the Chinibagh. Much consternation, but we stick with it for 20 minutes of hard walking right across town. Chaos of course at the Chinibagh with hordes of Pakistanis waiting with mountains of gear, but it is an official bus starting place, which varies from day to day! Total disorder over passports, tickets and manifests, but a helpful Chinese girl puts us at the top of the list, and Sam stands by the door of the bus regardless, as the seating is random. Then customs officials arrive,

and much of the Pakistanis' goods goes into sealed trucks, many bicycles, and one man has 70 carpets. Still tons of gear, and two buses are filled: the two of us, one American, about 60 Pakistanis and one very nice Uighur family. We depart at 12.30, hours late, but with a very enthusiastic driver.

Early lunch-stop near edge of the oasis (which has a lot of rice paddies) before setting out into wilderness. The Pakistanis and the Uighurs are friendly and cheerful, way better than a load of Han Chinese. Much English is spoken. Only downer is the dreadful Pakistani 'music'.

Superb road up the Gez Canyon through the eastern range of the Pamir Mountains, with huge



Heading into the Gez Canyon.

Our bus lurches over a new debris flow across the road.



glaciers and peaks of Kongur very close on the left. A rough ride over many banks of landslide debris, though parts of road are sealed with a fragile centimetre of tar. The road looks like economic nonsense with so little traffic and huge numbers of Uighur and Han road workers living in squalid camps next to cement and tar plants; but its value is to the military, and then perhaps much greater in the future. Stopped at one mudflow across the road where it had overwhelmed a bridge, probably due to a mini glacier burst. Stream is diverted back under the bridge but the mud and debris will not drain. After an hour a Chinese front-loader removes some of the debris, and the bus can drive over what's left, followed by a long line of trucks.

Pass a Japanese climbers' base camp, and see hoopoes, zhos, and camels. Then road passes out into a long valley with beautiful lakes and sand dunes, old lake terraces and wide grasslands with a few farms and yurts. Two checkpoints on road, then pass Muztagh Ata mountain with impressive serac fields on lower glaciers. Pamirs are turbidite scarps with beautiful augen gneiss and granite. Terraces are amazing, more than 300 m high, with alternating layers of boulder beds and silts; probably derived from repeated damming of lakes by major landslides.



Slopes of marginal stability above the road in the Gez Canyon.

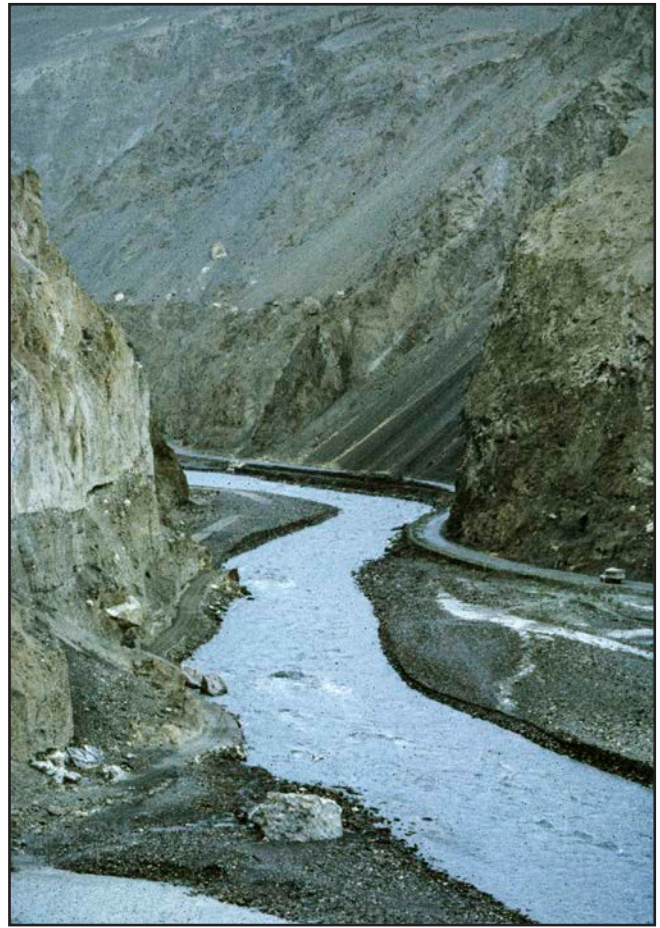
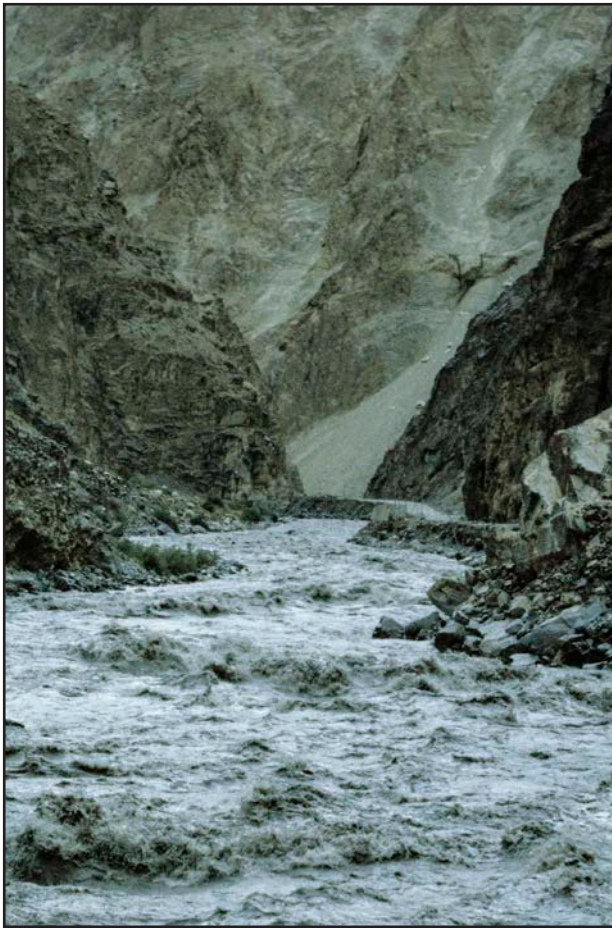
At 11.30pm (Beijing time), cross over a 4000 m pass, and in semi-darkness descend rough road into broad depression of Tashkorgan. Hotels are all full, as ours is the last of many buses to arrive. Locals go to much effort to no avail, and we end up sleeping in the bus. Fortunately not cold.

Thursday July 14, Khunjerab Pass

Up at 6.00 after minimal sleep, but were probably better off than in the packed dormitories. Chinese get very officious when Pakistanis make fires to keep warm, and we hang around for two hours before leaving, after nothing to eat or drink. Overcast and a little rain, but some sun finds the mountains. Huge gravel plain with braided streams extends up the Tashkorgan valley floor. Mountains on both sides are clear of snow. Valley into the Wakhan (Afghanistan) looks really wild and has only a rough trail.

Chinese Customs in the middle of nowhere, where we spend two hours doing very little. A money changer gives us US dollars for our remaining FEC. Farce over passports to get back into the bus. We go straight through Customs, but many of the Pakistanis have long delays; we see them stuffing money into large boxed tea sets (there are 37 of them on our bus), and they are hiding RMB anywhere possible. We are asked to take bottles of whisky into Pakistan, but we steer clear. Names are written in numerous files; pure bureaucracy, never to be seen again. Someone throws rubbish out of bus window, Chinese-style, and is lambasted by policeman who makes him pick it up and throw it on the ground a few metres farther away.

Eventually proceed, and bus goes even slower due to the poor fuel mix at altitude. Also stop so that Pakistanis can sell dozens of gold-thread scarves to Uighurs working on the road. Many Kyrgyz nomads, some yurts, grazing yaks, two nomads riding on zhos, camels, lots of large orange marmots and acres of purple flowers. Then more barren vistas on rise to Khunjerab Pass, at altitude of 4700 metres, far above nearby glaciers. The road was only completed six years previously, and is normally closed by snow for half of each year. The Karakoram Highway extends 1300 km from Kashgar to the main towns of Pakistan; it took 20 years to build, cost billions, and took the lives of just over 1000 workers during its construction.



The canyon followed by the Karakoram Highway from the foot of the Khunjerab Pass down to Sost.

Summit border posts proclaim national parks on both sides, but no other signs. We do not stop and then round a bend to nearly crash into a jeep; because they drive on the left in Pakistan, and our driver had forgotten to switch over. Steep descent on better road with zigzags dropping into gorge, then fantastic road next to bed of wild river all the way to Sost. We pass many snow bridges, landslides onto road, huge moraines, debris flows, one cave resurgence pouring high waterfall out of a cliff. Amazing scree slopes, high walls of bad rock, unstable debris slopes, collapsing cuttings, and bits of road rebuilt over landslides. An incredible road. First bits of greenery in terrace fields of Khudabad, where we re-join the original Silk Road route over the Mintaka Pass (with gentler gradients but militarily indefensible).

Then only a kilometre into Sost, the hastily built frontier town with tents, breeze blocks and corrugated iron for shops, 'hotels' etc all around frontier chaos with no real control of movement across the border. Immigration takes two minutes when names are hand-written in a huge, clumsy, old file, then Customs even quicker and again names in another huge file. Into hotel next door and hardboard room for 190R (=£6) with hot shower, welcoming but obsequious manager, green tea and change some dollars.

Beautiful mountains rise ahead through cloud layers, terraces high on each side of the valley; a very impressive location, and the welcome for British travellers is noticeable. Walkabout covers the whole place in five minutes. Back to hotel for excellent dinner of beef, egg, rice, potato, tomato for 30R each. Celebrate Bastille Day with a French couple with smuggled Chinese brandy; hotel owner tells of time before the Karakoram Highway was built, when he had to walk for six days to school in Gilgit, passing through five different languages each in its own independent state ruled over by its own Mir (hence mirdoms, later known as princely states) in its own widening of the valley, all within 200 km. A good evening to finish off a fantastic day.

Friday July 15, Sost

Lazy morning, cloud down in valley, intermittent rain. Watch a mass departure of Toyotas to China, and the Kashgar buses return empty! Breakfast of eggs and chapattis. Customs yard covered in Kashgar carpets with all being measured and entered into ledgers. Change more dollars at 18R, enjoy Cokes amid good atmosphere, but spots of rain, and the high peak is in cloud.

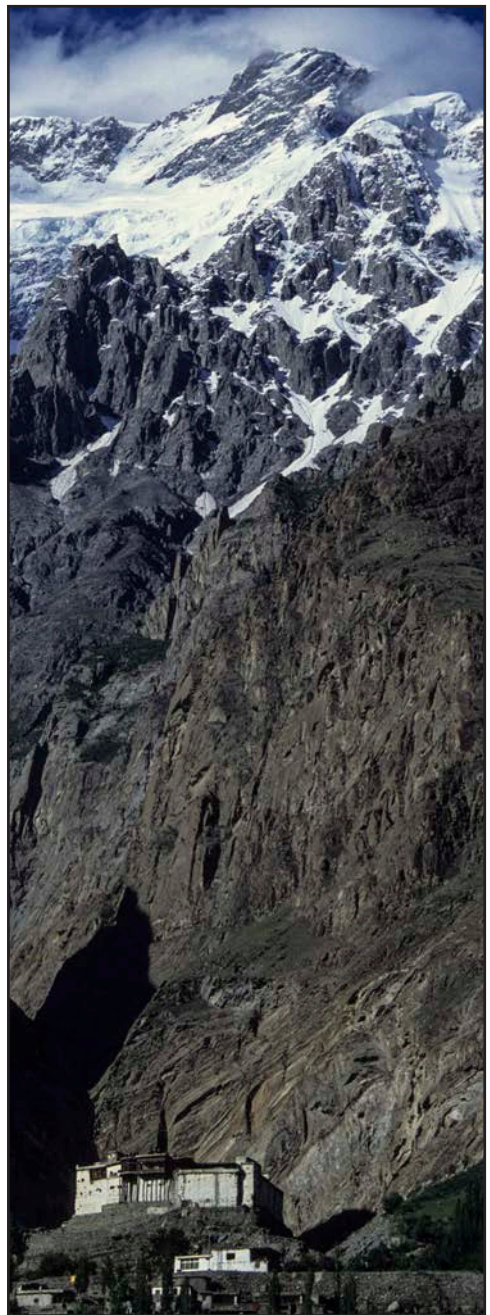
Walk up valley and over bridge to old village of Khudabad up 40 metres on a terrace, with friendly people and good views of upstream gorge. All buses left Sost in the morning and afternoon traffic is minimal. Offered a ride for 300R, but decline; then chat up the border official and at 3pm get a free lift in a minibus full of Pakistani tourists.

Comfortable ride down the valley, with spectacular views, but a little rain and the peaks are in cloud. Batura Glacier has enormous moraines, below huge scree, fine terraces and very steep rock slopes. Into granite and gneiss with many aplite dykes below Passu. One crashed car; a dozen landslides and debris flows to go over, and a few places where road had collapsed; many boulders on the road, one weighing 20 tons that had dented the road but left space to drive past; one small limestone mine at roadside.

We were dropped off at Ganish in the Hunza bowl, and had 20-minute walk up steep jeep track rising 200 m to Karimabad village. This is now the main village just below Baltit, the original capital of the Hunza Mirdom. Hunza Hotel full, but we get a basic room in the Karimabad Hotel for 40R with our own terrace and fantastic view of the mountains. Sam comments that his Huddersfield friends would have no idea of what this was like. Walk into village to buy biscuits, Cokes and postcards; have dinner in New Hunza Hotel, rice, dal, curried potato for 22R, with amusing crowd of English and Dutch. Back in the dark, to a paraffin lamp in our luxury room.

Saturday July 16, Hunza

Up at 7.00 in light rain, layered cloud above and below us, superb view from our terrace even though summits are in cloud. Up to New Hunza Hotel for good breakfast of porridge and eggs. Walk about in village and learn that the main road both up and down the valley is closed by landslides in yesterday's rain.. Walk along terrace south and find the Aliabad road washed out by a torrent that left 20-ton boulders on the tarmac, currently being attacked by a gang of local men. Walk back along irrigation canal and call in tiny post office for enormous stamps to send cards. Warren of narrow lanes fit only for walking between lovely old stone houses. The new road branching off the Karakoram Highway is an intrusion, but is well built round the edges of the old villages.



Mountain backdrop for the old Baltit Fort.



The back road to Aliabad, down from Karimabad, that was ripped out and then covered by large boulders during the flood caused by the heavy overnight rain.

Rain clears a little after noon, and glaciers come clear across the valley. Walk up to Baltit, a scruffy village below the spectacularly located fort with wooden balconies supported on dubious timbers; it was the home of the Mir of Baltit until 1945, and Hunza was a separate 'princely state' until 1947. Path beyond crosses very steep scree into Ullar gorge where bridge and trail to Altit are washed out, so that village is cut off for a while.

Back to our terrace to watch the clouds clear after more rain. We find a shop packed full with Chinese loo rolls: they seem to export all that they make. Dinner in our hotel; rice, potatoes and dal, but they forget the dal.

Sunday July 17, Nagar

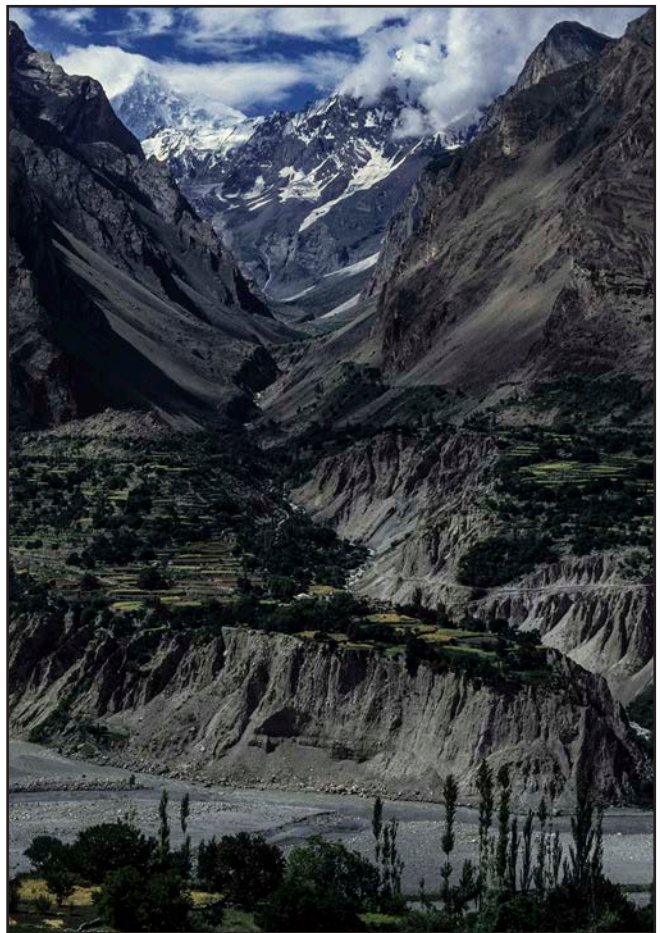
Breakfast of porridge at the New Hunza again, and then we set off to walk up the Nagar valley. Down to Ganesh then over the Hunza River on the new Highway bridge, past large signs saying 'photographs prohibited', right next to signboard displaying all the bridge statistics (width, span, arches etc) that a terrorist would need to know. Up steep path onto terraces with blown sand where we join the jeep track up the valley. Spectacular geology with marble, garnet schists, biotite granites, aplites, pegmatites, skarn and serpentinite. A barren valley for 5 km with the track cut into steep walls of rock and barely cemented cobble beds.

Up into Nagar, a long village on a terrace nearly filling a side valley. No shops, a large religious centre unused, and a general air of tat; some fine old houses, apricots, apples, potatoes, beans, wheat; with sheep, goats, donkeys, cows, hoopoes. Dubious tea-shop at top end for views up further brown valley. Nagar was the capital of a princely state until 1974, an isolated mirdom with hardly any connections to anywhere else.

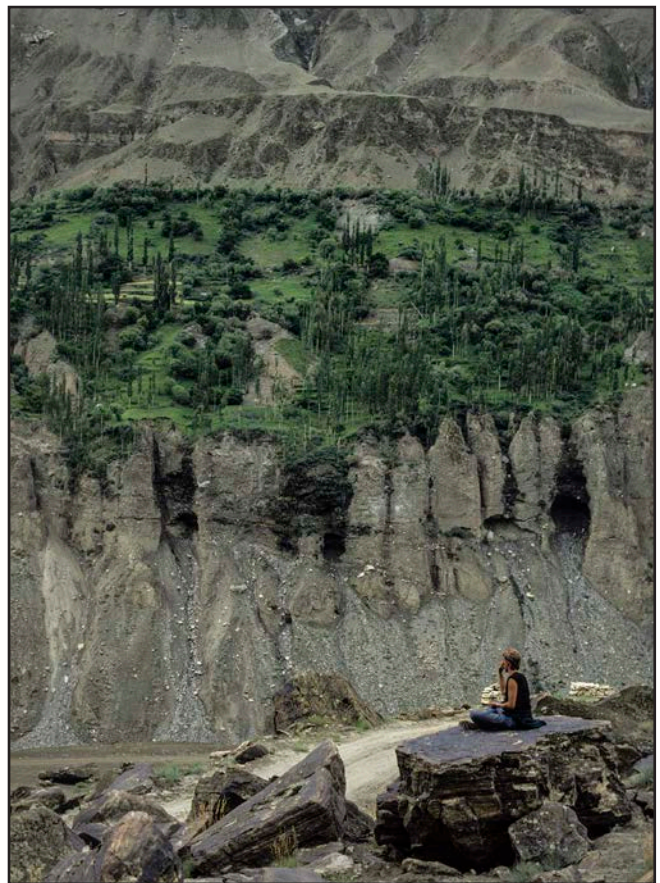
Long walk back, and drinks in Ganish before up the hill for better weather in the evening. Good dinner at the New Hunza again, but amusing walk back in total darkness along narrow path beside irrigation canal.

Monday July 18, Hunza valley

Breakfast at New Hunza, then off for a walk along the main terraces. Road across river now cleared, and no more torrent, but the surface has been ripped up and will take more repair work before it is driveable. Large boulders had been blasted, the rest broken with hammers or levered over the edge. Continue on field paths, through unexciting Hyderabad, and past Chumar Bakhor in front of the great white mountain of Rakaposhi. All the high level agricultural land is



The view from our terrace.



Lunch stop at Nagar.

on terraces of lake sediments that formed upstream of a landslide dam since largely eroded away so that the lake drained. [In 2010 the Attabad landslide, 14 km upstream of Ganish, created a lake 100 metres deep and 21 km long, burying or drowning 400 village houses; the Karakoram Highway relied on small ferries until 24 km of new road was opened in 2015, and a smaller lake is still there.]

Down very steep track to main road, and through Aliabad in search of drinks; an unexciting village except for some beautifully painted trucks, and good views down the valley. Gemstone shop has many cut stones, and I buy a multi-coloured tourmaline. Suzuki minibus for 1R each back to Ganish and steep walk up. Sam not feeling good so lays up for the later afternoon. Short walk up behind the village for views of Ultar gorge and Altit village. Dinner just for me at the New Hunza again, as Sam retires early.

Tuesday July 19, Hunza

I get up at 6.00 and leave Sam asleep. Walk to Chumar Bakhor for photos in good light. Well worth it, but feel bad on the way back and fortunately catch a Suzuki ride back to Karimabad. Sam is feeling better, while I feel progressively worse. We pay up at hotel; total room and some food for three days was £12 for the two of us. Stagger down to Ganish and wait for a bus.

Just an hour and a Natco bus comes with good seats at the back, but it breaks down before Aliabad; then stops there for food amid rumours that it is firmly dead. I feel awful, and Sam goes off to find transport, and soon returns with places in a group renting a Suzuki to Gilgit for 30R each. A winner, and we pile in for a hair-raising ride down the valley. Great scenery, less exciting after leaving the Hunza bowl, but some dramatic bits of road. Turn off the new Highway on back road that emerges straight from a tunnel onto a suspension bridge so narrow that it can take nothing larger than a Suzuki, and then only one at a time. Wide Gilgit valley with fast road between barren slopes into town.

Gilgit is larger than we expected, and we find a good room with fan and shower for 180R in JSR Hotel right in centre of town. Convenient but noisy, and I don't have the strength to walk any further with a pack. We walk to the post office, but it had already closed at 3pm. Recuperate with cold Cokes. Then brief visit to a Pathan restaurant thick with flies, where Sam has kebab and rice and is feeling better.

Wednesday July 20, Gilgit

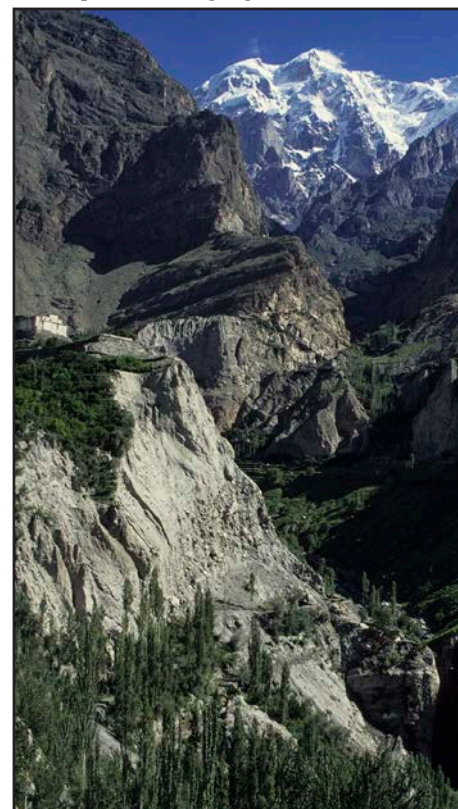
We both feel better and get up at 7.00. Breakfast of not-so-good porridge and cornflakes, joined by Iranian from Shiraz who tells of hatred for Khomeini who just wants to steal a chunk of Iraq, while folks reflect that the time of the Shah was good, and the stories of Savak were all exaggerated. Up to post office at 8.30, but still no mail.

Extensive bazaars with hundreds of small shops; clearly more on offer than in China. Flies everywhere, excessive rubbish, dodgy



Rakaposhi beyond the terraces of Hunza.

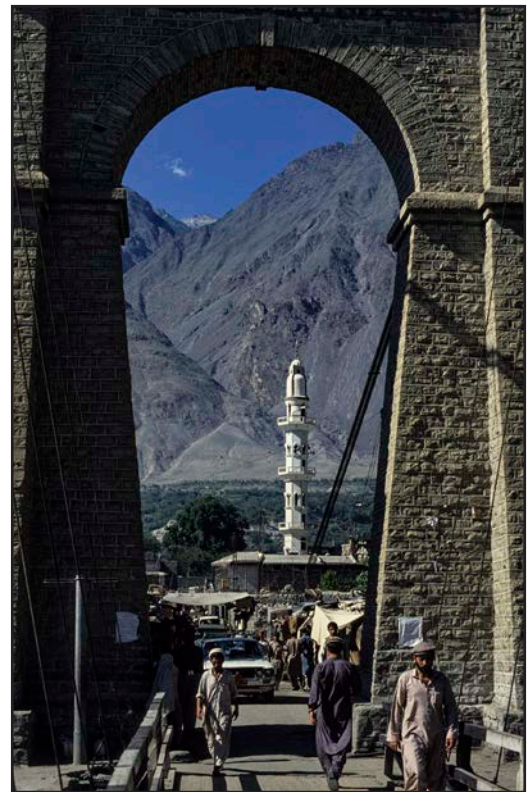
View up the Ultar gorge.



butchers, but plenty of Coke. Traffic police are useless and don't know the way to anywhere. Try bus booking offices, but get conflicting stories; perseverance at Natco, and we find there is a deluxe bus leaving at 9am, beside four others between 4am and 11pm, but can only book one day ahead. Ledger booking system is archaic, and enquiry responses only come after immaculate patience. Long walk to telephone office, but told lines to Rawalpindi are down so must wait.

Walkabout in town for photos, then hotel to rest up through afternoon heat; fan is welcome. Buy Peshawar newspaper, but the only news from England is the cricket score at Trent Bridge. Back to telephone office at 3pm, as advised, and told by a moron that calls to London are never possible; then a military signals guy tells us that the lines will not be open for a week, after monsoon rains took them out further south.

Take a Suzuki ride to Jutial, good value at 2R for 5 km. Village is up on a fan, with great views down the valley and across to Rakaposhi. Serena Lodge is sheer luxury for Cokes, and then walkabout before good dinner of soup, chicken and fruit. Then dark, and total lack of Suzukis back to Gilgit. A couple from a missionary school tell of the horrors of purdah, with curtains inside the house so that the wife is never seen. Pick up a lift in an Exodus truck back to the airport, and walk through dark town to hotel.



Gilgit, through another suspension bridge.

Thursday July 21, Gilgit valley

Up at 7.30 and breakfast with an American having major Customs hassle over a Kashgar silk carpet. Down to Natco bus station where deluxe bus looks good and worth the extra 30R, making it 135R to Rawalpindi. Into booking office and clamouring chaos, with stories that all buses are full because it is the big Eid al Adha holiday, two months after the end of Ramadan. But delicate patience and we queue jump to buy tickets (for Friday) soon after 9.00 from a foreigner-friendly clerk.

Then rent bikes for 5R per hour with no deposit; Chinese, but in good condition. Ride out on Hunza road for photos of washed-out bridges, and of the tunnel-bridge across the Gilgit River; movement of the suspension bridge as a minibus goes across is spectacular [both bridge and tunnel are replaced by a new road a few years later]. We wait for sun for photos, but then hot ride back, and best-ever cold Cokes in the first shop. Round town to post office, where Sam's results in Poste Restante; good, so it was a very good day.

Back in hotel to avoid the afternoon heat. Then walkabout found no newspapers, a returning polo team, women in protective gear, herds of goats, and biscuits for the bus ride. Dinner at Park Hotel with roast chicken and jalfreizi. Walk back in total darkness.

Friday July 22, Indus valley

Walk to bus station for 8am, but bus then goes off for new tyres, and returns at 10.00. Poor seats midway along bus, but deluxe worth it for the extra legroom. Road is good, but many stops where lousy food and no Coke. Pick up a group of 20 soldiers who all ride on the roof.

Follow the Hunza River to confluence with much larger Indus River, and Nanga Parbat is mostly in cloud. Cross to left bank at Rakhiot Bridge, with signs to new road and resort on Fairy Meadow. Along spectacular Indus Gorge, but frustrating because we are on wrong side of bus until we re-cross river late in the afternoon. Road is an amazing feat



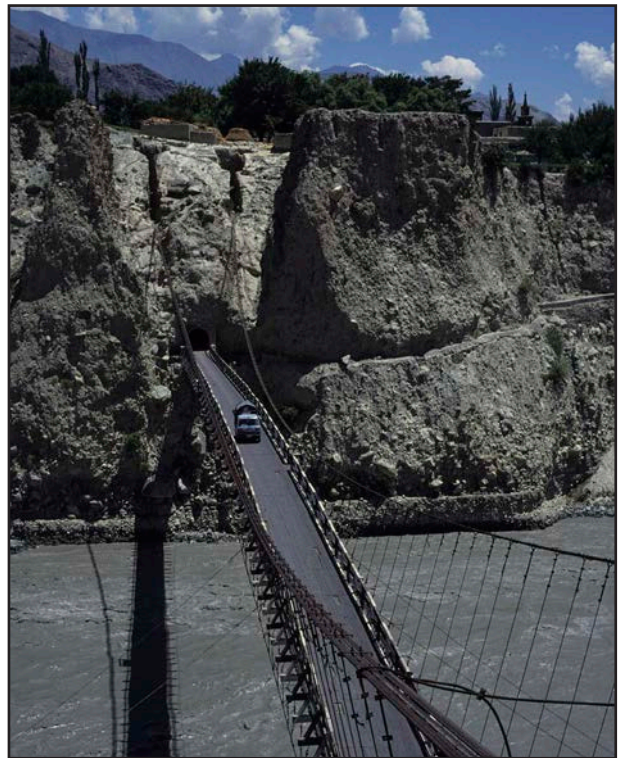
Main street of Gilgit with typical painted truck and passing goats.

of construction, but driving is not so good. Spectacular crashes include one where truck has gone way down and into river, which is powerful, fast, brown, deep white-water; not good. Gorge is magnificent, with steep slopes, many landslides, and high terraces behind old landslide dams since cut through. More villages after passing Jalkot, many occupying ludicrous sites, and also spectacular isolated farms.

Police checkpoint where we leave the Indus at Thakot bridge and climb into hills and darkness. Heavy rain brings the rooftop soldiers inside, so is seriously crowded. The night is hard; we are thirsty and hungry and tired.

Saturday July 23, into Rawalpindi

Dawn rises slowly on a fast road across the plains south of Abbotabad, with typical scenes of chaos, buffaloes and people sleeping out. Stop at police check on Grand Trunk Road; entire roof luggage gone through, and a large pile of Chinese goods is left on the roadside along with a number of passengers. Continue through villages and dense population, then up to very colourful bus station that is a great intro for Sam to an Indo-Pak city.



The very flexible suspension bridge that carries the side-road across the Gilgit River.



South from Gilgit, the Karakoram Highway lies on ledges cut into the steep walls of the Indus River's spectacular gorge.

Taxi into town hassled down to a par 20R. In past hordes of people, many roadside animals, very dodgy river, and then the bazaars of old Pindi; lots of colour early in the morning and total traffic chaos. Half an hour to Flashman's Hotel on a tree-lined mall in the old British sector, and we check in at 5.45am without being charged for the extra night. Room at 500R is almost en suite with a welcome thermos of cold water. We both collapse onto beds and wake at 11am.

Lunch of chicken sandwiches and then out for walkabout in Saddar area. Goats, cows, rubbish on roads, open sewers, colourful buses and minibuses, plenty of shops, buy Newsweek, chocolate and camera film. Lots to see and lots to avoid. Park with sleeping people; Sam asks why do they always look dead? Rest through afternoon heat, then out to good Chinese restaurant, pass cinema with Conan showing, and back in darkness to late TV that is fairly bad except for Test Match cricket.

Sunday July 24, Rawalpindi

Up at 8.00 for dubious breakfast. Walk up Murree Road to old town; superb bazaar with lots of chaos, colour and filth, cows, goats, sheep, few women. From Rajah Bazaar take Suzuki with 17 people in it to Pir Waddih bus station, with spectacular painted buses. Pass Afghan refugee camp and numerous water buffaloes. Tuktuk

back to the station, and see workers cleaning shit from the railway tracks, maybe world's worst job? Walk back through Saddar; a good morning, and in by 2pm when it starts getting very hot. It had rained hard in the night, and news reports of floods, closed roads and widespread travel chaos.

A pleasant swim in the afternoon sun, then walk to Intercontinental Hotel for views from top floor. Back there for excellent dinner of roast beef and best-ever chocolate ice cream.

Monday July 25, Islamabad

Up at 9.00 and Sam not feeling at his best, but we set off for Islamabad. The sheer scale of this sprawling new capital city only a few kilometres from the old Pindi makes a taxi well worthwhile, and the Eid holiday means that the streets are quiet. See cows being carved up on the roadside for family feasts, with piles of offal growing through the day, to the benefit of hooded crows. The city is very green, but cold, spread out, only partly developed and totally lacking in any character; shopping areas are already tatty. Main mosque is very impressive, all polished granite and marble, paid for by the Saudis. Shoes off and walk round, almost empty, just geometrical shapes. Limestone hills to the north provide a good viewpoint.

Back at 2pm, vacate room, and go to smart hotel for milk shakes and memorably good banana split. But everything closed up for Eid, and afternoon is still hot, so take taxi to airport when boredom strikes. Mistake. Islamabad Airport is a real dump, and all international lounges are closed. Some long arguments because the only seats are concrete, but we finally manage to get through moronic security to a small room with decent chairs for a long read and sleep; nothing else there. At 11pm, the tannoy calls for passengers, so we all go to Departure, and the door is locked. Then it opens, and Customs is closed. Then they open, and Security is closed. Then they ask for 350R airport tax, but they have no change and the bank is closed. The whole place is so badly organised it is pathetic.

Tuesday July 26, flight home

Further waiting in small hours; talk to a Dutch couple who had three weeks to and from Kashgar with Exodus for £600; we reckon we did better. Have aisle exit seats but sleep little. Hour-long stops at Istanbul and Schipol, then cloudy into London. Meet Peter at exit, and Sam goes with him straight to Cardiff for a Michael Jackson concert that evening, then to Birmingham next day, and on Thursday into hospital for five days with pneumonia. Different!



Street scene in Rawalpindi.



The Faisal Mosque in Islamabad, a gift from Saudi Arabia.



Loading up at the Pir Waddih bus station in Rawalpindi.