

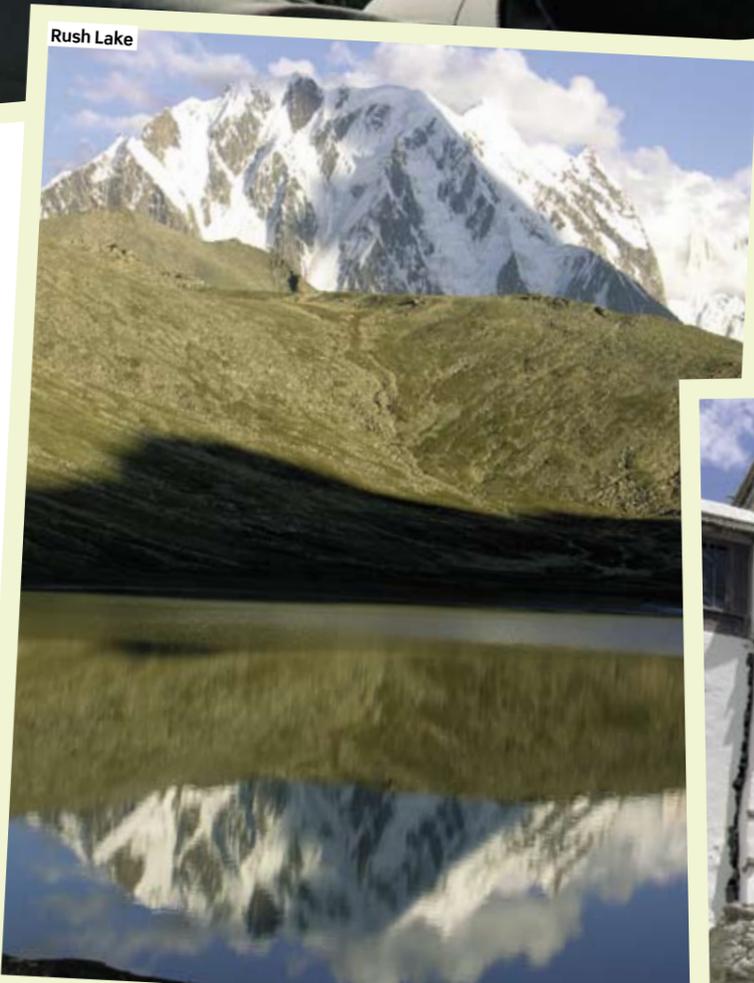
ROOM FOR A VIEW

Revel in the solitude of northern Pakistan on a trek through the heart of the magnificent Karakoram mountains

WORDS AMY ADAMS

The top of Rush Peak is not the best place to stop and rest. A rocky, uneven ledge at 5098m, it wouldn't take much more than an altitude-induced stagger to send you hurtling onto the jagged spikes below. Which is a shame, because the effort involved in getting there is the kind that makes you want to

linger. And then there's the view. Far below us Rush Lake mirrors the rings of mountains around it, the nearest circle rolling shades of olive green, the outer thrusting snowy peaks into the sky. The only cloud in the blue is a ghostly lasso around Golden Peak to the south. But most of us are looking east, to the small white triangle



Rush Lake



The Baltit Fort, Karimabad

NEED TO KNOW

WHEN TO GO The trekking season in the Northern Areas runs from May to October, after which it gets too cold.

GETTING THERE Pakistan International Airlines (www.piac.com.pk) flies from London to Islamabad. From here you can take a bus up the Karakoram Highway to the Hunza Valley, or catch a domestic flight into nearby Gilgit.

VISAS Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans need a visa for Pakistan, which must be obtained before entering the country. See www.phclondon.org.

MONEY Pakistani rupee. 1 GBP = 123.97 PKR.

LANGUAGE Urdu is the official language but there are many other dialects and languages used across Pakistan. Urdu is made easier with its sprinkling of English words and phrases — 'toilet tent' becomes a useful one when trekking.

GETTING AROUND If you're not on an organised tour, public buses and minibuses are the most budget-friendly way to get around.

ACCOMMODATION Fairy Meadows is one of the only trekking destinations with huts in Pakistan. Otherwise you'll need to take your own camping equipment.

VITAL INFO For advice on safe travel in Pakistan see the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office website www.fco.gov.uk. **SEE** www.tourism.gov.pk.

on the horizon. From here the summit of K2, the world's second highest mountain, looks like a doddle to climb.

In fact, it's not the only obstacle that seems easily surmountable. Up

in the Karakoram Mountains of northern Pakistan it's hard to believe that the country has an image problem. If tourists could only see this, you feel, they'd be arriving in hordes, regardless of the negative news reports and Foreign Office warnings. Instead, it's day three of our trek and the only other group we've seen were

students from Lahore. Sitting atop Rush Peak it's something I'm not altogether sorry about.

Pakistan is home to five peaks over 8000m (there are only 14 of them in the world), and most are in the Karakoram Range in the Northern Areas). Before 9/11, tourism here was on the up as talk of the mountains and glaciers spread through the trekking community.

Karimabad, a base for hikers in the Hunza Valley, is testament to this. It's a traveller's idyll, with delicious food, gift shops filled with woven rugs and gemstone jewellery, and even the possibility of mulberry wine, thanks to the laid-back Ismaili Muslims. Or

“If tourists could only see this, you feel, they'd be arriving in hordes”

at least it should be. When we were there the restaurants were empty, the shops collecting dust and the Baltit Fort — a wonderfully restored 800-year-old fortress — deserted.

After a day of sightseeing and a magical sunset at Eagle's Nest, we head to Hoper in the Nagyr valley, the start of our four-day trek to Rush Peak. At this tiny village there's almost more bustle than in Karimabad, as our 17 porters (for a group of six) buzz about, dividing food and camping gear into equal loads of 25kg (each carefully measured by the sirdar — head porter).

We set off together, but within 10 minutes they're far ahead, skittering over the Bualtar glacier behind them with our Gore-Tex boots and hiking poles.

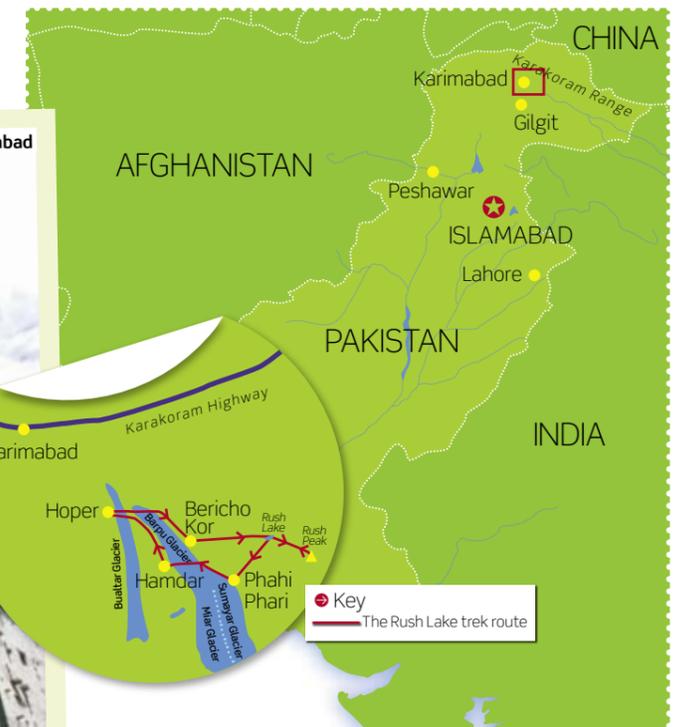
It's a relief to reach the more stable, rocky ground of the Barpu Glacier's terminal moraine, and soon we're safe in the green valley beyond, making our way

to our first campsite — a lush clearing called Bericho Kor.

The name means “musician's hut or cave”, and thanks to our early arrival there's plenty of time after a dinner of vegetables, dhal and rice for our porters to prove why. Round a camp fire some of them bang a rhythm on empty barrels as others sing us romantic songs about unrequited love — translated by our guide Sohail.

Before we know it we're stuck in a pattern of alternating performances. Soon through our Beatles repertoire, we're struggling for a song we all know the words to. There's nothing for it but *Old Macdonald Had A Farm*, complete with actions and translations into Urdu.

Our porters forgive us enough to continue on the next day, a tough zig-zag ascent towards our lunch spot among grazing sheep on the open pastures of Chidin Harai. Here, at 4440m, the altitude is kicking, in and by the time we arrive at Rush ➔



AWAY WITH THE FAIRIES

For a rewarding overnight trek head to Jhel near Chilas where, if you survive the nail-biting jeep ride, it's just a four-hour hike up to Fairy Meadows. A narrow path leads steadily up through pine forests and over rocky hills, but the highlight in this case isn't the journey — it's the destination.

Fairy Meadows more than deserves its ethereal name: it's a crumpled quilt of lush green pastures with views across the snow-covered Nanga Parbat, Pakistan's second highest peak. At 3300m it's a lofty clearing, home to a small seasonal population. Each summer, while kids too young to ride practice the local sport of polo by galloping on foot round the fields, their elders farm livestock or turn their hand to the burgeoning local trade: tourism.

There are five sets of tourist cottages and campsites, the small pockets of neat wooden huts adding to the fairy-tale feel of the place. It's the ideal spot to stay a few nights and relax, with the option of a side trip to Nanga Parbat base camp. Whatever you decide to do, don't leave without setting your alarm one morning early enough to see the sun light up this majestic mountain.

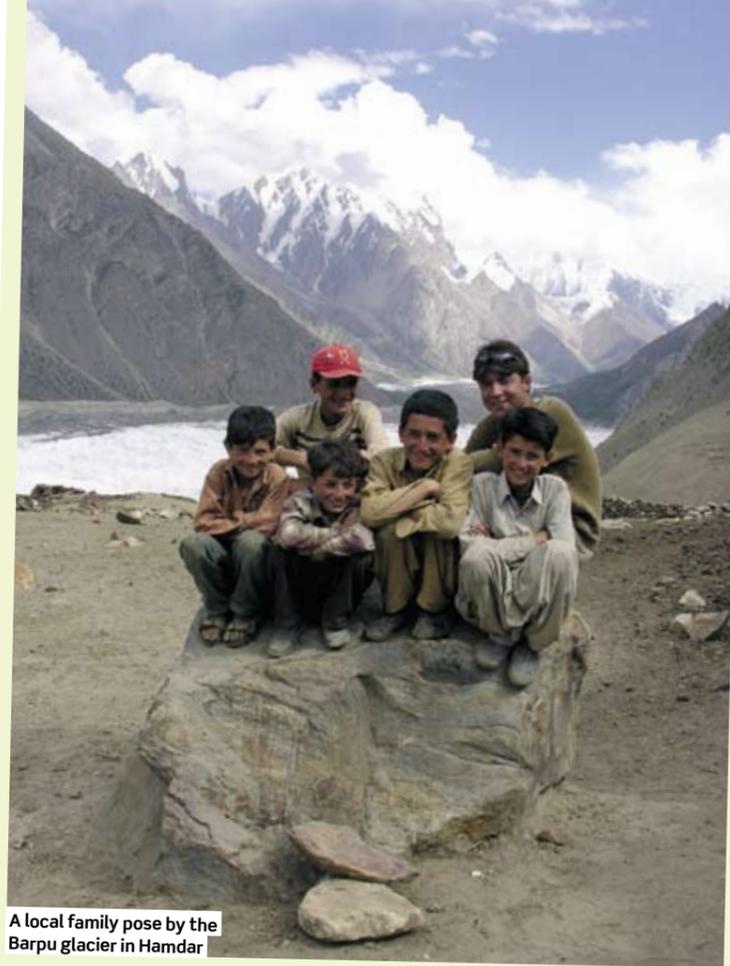
“The porters form a handrail across the rapids, passing us between them”

Lake, despite a two-week detox (Pakistan is a dry country) my head aches with the dull throb of a red wine hangover.

It goes by the time I crawl out of my tent for our early morning ascent of Rush Peak, and thankfully doesn't reappear even as we cool off afterwards in the chilly lake water. Swimming fully-clothed out of respect for the local culture, we soon dry out in the piercing sunlight while wolfing down a hearty brunch of porridge, chips and omelette.

The afternoon is a steep descent to our final campsite — a lesson that downhill is fun on a bike but not so much on your legs, or toes (both my big toe nails would later fall off in protest).

A curious yak watches our progress from above as we wind



A local family pose by the Barpu glacier in Hamdar

our way down 1300m, trying to make the most of the view of the white, icy Miar and black, stony Sumayar Bar glaciers joining to form the Barpu while keeping an eye on the treacherously steep path. At Phai Phari our wobbly legs give in and we collapse before our first group of foreign tourists — three Europeans heading the other way.

When the rain wakes us the next day, I'm thankful it's not us trekking back uphill. Even so, it becomes clear the combination

of wet and glacier ahead isn't that great either. It's a race against time to cross the Barpu glacier before the myriad streams running through it morph into raging torrents. With a few detours we make it safely to ice-free land, and up to a path cut into the side of the ablation valley.

The adventure isn't over yet, though. Before long we turn a corner to find that a small stream running over our path has swollen dramatically. Taking off their shoes and socks, the porters form

a human handrail across the rapids, passing us between them as they steady themselves against the force of the water.

Eventually we reach the other side, and the calm of the level green fields beyond. We munch our last lunch of noodle soup, cream cheese and crackers by an isolated farm at Hamdar. The porters use the time off to wash under a water pipe while the rest of us explore. A group of local kids lead us to their home, giggling as they show us how to make butter in a wooden churn in the corner.

When we pour out into the sunlight, the six of them perch expertly on a rock, setting up the perfect photo as the Barpu snakes its river of ice behind them.

It's quite clear tourists have been here before, and hopefully many more will follow in our wake. Not too many, though. The Karakorams are a trekking wonderland too good not to share, but you wouldn't want to have to jostle for the view at the top.

» Amy Adams travelled with TravelPak (0844-555 8855; www.travelpak.co.uk). A 14-day trip including the Rush Lake trek is £825 with full-board accommodation and meals (no flights). TravelPak also offers a choice of two- to five-day treks that can be incorporated into any visit to Pakistan.

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TOP 5 TREKS

by Sohail Azhar of TravelPak

THE WAKHAN CORRIDOR

15 days

This trek takes you along the strip of Afghanistan that lies just north of Pakistan called the Wakhan Corridor. Seldom done, it's a stunning route offering sweeping views of the Hindu Kush range before heading into the heart of the Karakorams. Taking you to a maximum height of 5160m, past pristine lakes and ice-white glaciers, the route offers a fantastic mix of culture and scenery.

OWIR AN

4 days

This hike through the Hindu Kush takes you over 4000m passes and ridges with breathtaking close-up views of Tirich Mir, the highest mountain of the range at 7770m.

HON PASS

2 days

Great for those short on time who still want the views, this trek heads from Karimabad to the lush Ultar Meadows where you camp right next to the

creaking Ultar Glacier. Day two takes you to the 4250m Hon Pass for views of the fabled Hunza Valley and the world's highest mountains, including the majestic Rakaposhi (7788m) and Diran (7266m).

SHIMSHAL PASS AND MINGLIG SAR

5 days

Follow the yak herders to the Shimshal Pass and possibly the highest settlement in Pakistan at 4300m where you'll find the fascinating people of Shimshal. As a treat, why not challenge yourself to tackle Minglig Sar and bag a 6000m peak?

CONCORDIA AND THE K2 BASE CAMP

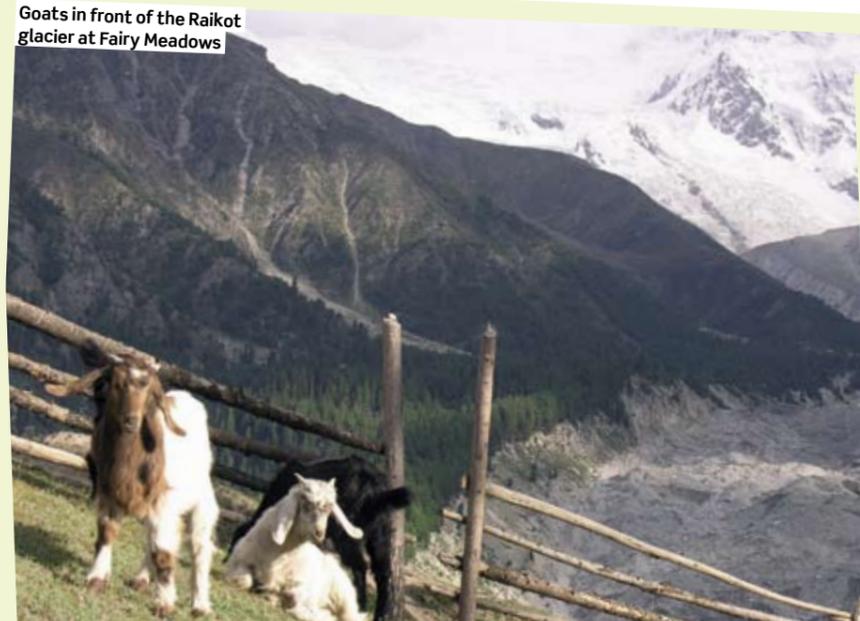
15 days

The ultimate trekker's trek. Take on one of the longest glaciers in the world, the Baltoro, and be rewarded with magical views of the perfect cone of K2. At 8611m, K2 is the second highest mountain in the world but known as the hardest to conquer. If the Gondogoro Pass is open on the return leg, it's the only place in the world where you can see four 8000m-plus mountains in one view.

K2, the world's second highest peak



Young boys pose with their polo sticks in Fairy Meadows



Goats in front of the Raikot glacier at Fairy Meadows



Taking a nap after lunch at Chidin Harai



Village of Hoper