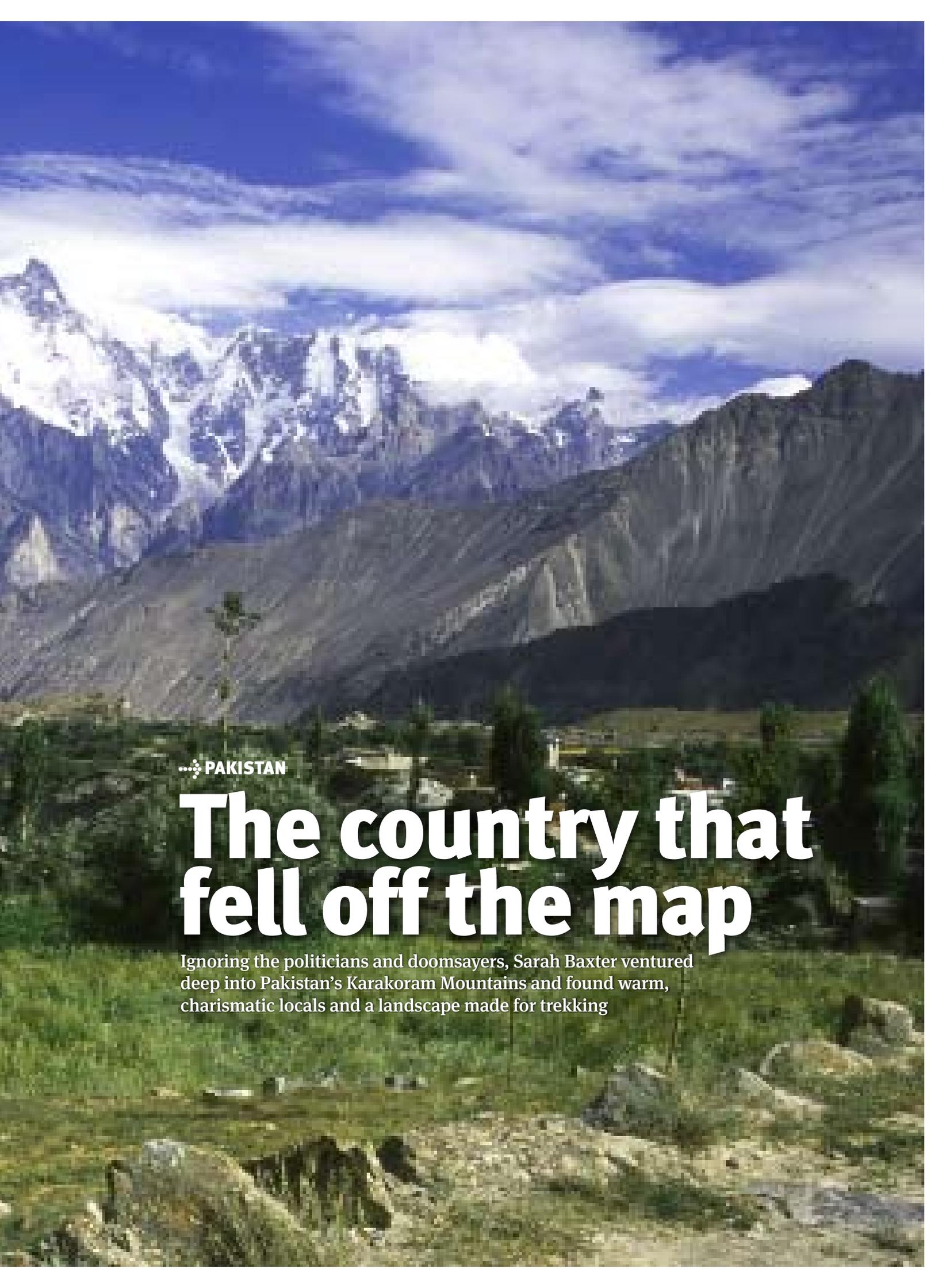




Verdant and wild:
The Nagyr Valley
makes a striking
starting point for
a trek into the
mountains



••• PAKISTAN

The country that fell off the map

Ignoring the politicians and doomsayers, Sarah Baxter ventured deep into Pakistan's Karakoram Mountains and found warm, charismatic locals and a landscape made for trekking



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Read me.
Go on, it won't hurt.
I know what you're thinking – Pakistan is dangerous; just look at the headlines. Restless neighbours over Afghanistan way. Terrorism. Economic turmoil. Civil unrest. Not surprising it doesn't top most holiday lists. But stay with me on this. It's worth it.

I was heading north on a two-week foray towards the Chinese border, following the silk traders of millennia past along the Karakoram Highway (KKH) to a land where three mighty mountain ranges collide. But I wasn't far out of Islamabad when I realised – media be damned – that I was probably going to have the time of my life.

We'd pulled over in a lay-by after just a few hours' driving, halted by its occupants: a cluster of trucks. Now trucks on the KKH demand attention. They are mechanical showgirls, every inch adorned with a painted scene, gilt fringe, tassel or jangly bit. They wheeze and huff like aged dames but look a million dollars.

Some men were gossiping by their vehicles, but stopped when we – four Western girls – ambled into their midst. "It costs a year's wages to decorate a truck," one of the drivers explained as we checked out his novelty hub caps, "but who will hire you to move his cargo if your truck looks no good?"

In truck lore, things aren't PC – appearance is everything. The drivers loved us loving their technicoloured HGVs and, before long, we were invited into one of their cabs. Dodging pom-poms and sounding the horn like a proper girl-racer – the driver's pet kestrel keeping watch behind my shoulder – I mused: if only the Foreign Office could see me now. This was about as frightening as a drive through the Cotswolds – if a little more surreal.

Indeed, this clearly wasn't the Cotswolds. Unless they've become significantly hillier. The KKH – a masterpiece of engineering and main artery of Pakistan's Northern Areas – cuts a dash through the Himalaya, Karakoram and Hindu Kush, and comes laden with expectation; it's a legend among roads. And as I spent many, *many* hours driving its potholed length, I thanked Allah that window-gazing has never been so absorbing.

There was always something to watch. Islamabad's outskirts gave way to green terraced slopes and by the time we'd reached Chilas, 12 hours north, we were following the River Indus through raw-brown mountains. We'd seen the 'makeshift' emergency shelters still housing survivors of the cataclysmic 2005 earthquake, along with traders hawking umbrellas and SpongeBob SquarePantses. We'd smelled diesel and kebabs in equal measure, and – very occasionally – we'd glimpsed a woman, shrouded in a burkha. >

◀ We did have one hiccup, at Thieves' Corner (don't leave me yet...). The rogues, who you'd think might have found somewhere less obviously notorious to do their ne'er-do-welling, had been hereabouts a few days previously. "You cannot pass," a young policeman commanded. "You must wait for a convoy of vehicles – for your safety."

It was late and dark and we were getting hungry, but we had no choice. And though there was a truck stop serving food just back down the road, Sohail, our guide, thought we were too conspicuous to march in. However, this soon became immaterial – the truck stop came to us. Saag and chapatis were passed into our van as an inquisitive audience of men gathered and wanted to know: where were our husbands?

We survived the curiosity and the thieves unscathed.

It was all an adventure – and we hadn't even 'done' anything yet. Our first proper stop came the next day at Fairy Meadow, a don't-look-down-at-the-drop jeep ride off the KKH followed by a short walk. We were in serious mountain territory now, and the pine-scented air thinned as we hiked up to our 3,300m destination.

Or perhaps it was those fairies breathing it all in, because I've no doubt they live here. This alpine plateau was like Hobbiton; shacks nestled on grassy knolls, tiny frogs hopped between the edelweiss, children played horseless polo with handmade mallets, lolloping as if they were truly riding stallions.

separate world where only mountains, stars (innumerable) and polo mattered. But the next day we were to descend, to rejoin the KKH and carry on to Karimabad, the ancient capital of the Hunza Valley.

However, it was merely a case of swapping one Shangri-La for another. Having arrived there after dark, pulling the curtains back the next day was a delight – the sun shone down on a forest of fruit trees and a bare scrape of dusty foothills before blinding off the 7,000m-plus snow-capped peaks above.

The people of Hunza are Ismaili Muslims, followers of the Aga Khan, and tend to have a more liberal outlook than other Islamic sects. There's even a bit of boozing, though *arak* (a potent mulberry wine) is usually consumed behind closed doors. They must be doing something right, though: Hunzakuts are famed for their longevity. I learned about this (apparently the secret is fresh air and apricot oil) on a tour of Baltit Fort, the crowning glory of Karimabad, which at 765 years old is doing pretty well itself.

Long a neglected ruin, a painstaking restoration in the 1990s has revived this Tibetan-style stronghold, set at the highest point of the village against the mountains. We saw only two other people here. A young lad was lounging on a veranda near the entrance, and smiled broadly when he saw us, urging: "We have no Taliban here!" The other was a security guard who sported facial hair of the most remarkable length

'This was about as frightening as a drive through the Cotswolds – if more surreal and significantly hillier'

Tea was served alfresco by a boy with the most astonishing blue-green eyes. We pulled up chairs on the grass outside our wooden chalet and sipped the brew while gazing at Nanga Parbat – we had an unobscured, in-your-face view of the world's ninth-highest mountain, the westernmost point of the Himalaya. There's no gradual tapering to a pretty cone summit here; Nanga Parbat is broad and beefy, massif in every sense.

And then it moved.

A mushroom of snow started to billow on one side. At this distance it was eerily silent and slow, a colossal tonnage nudged past its tipping point, gathering, enlarging and plunging unstopably down. An avalanche ripping off 8,125m of mountain: interested now?

Of course, we were the only visitors to see it; we'd come across no other tourists so far, and Wakheel – he of the beautiful eyes – seemed grateful we were here as he walked me around his utopian home. About 200 people live on Fairy Meadow, he told me, and only in summer; in winter there is too much snow. He'd played polo that morning ("I scored many goals!"), and he pointed out the horses and their fancy saddles. He was less forthcoming when I asked where all the women were, simply shrugging his shoulders with a tell-nothing grin.

You could get stuck on the Meadow. If it wasn't for the fact you'd walked up there you might believe it existed in a

and arrangement; on spying us, I saw him lift his jet-black moustaches and position them carefully behind his ears.

His grooming would have been a distraction if the fort itself wasn't so impressive. We crouched through its tiny doorways and found ourselves in an ancient fortress, with ladderless prison cells in the basement and ruthless defences that once enabled hot oil to be poured over unwanted intruders.

Nature provided cooling: the pantry was chilled by ducts coming straight from the nearby glacier (which has now receded) and the 'summer floor's' vents provided natural air-conditioning. The fact that this building has survived so long in a region regularly rocked by earthquakes is a testament to those early engineers.

I could feel myself melting into Karimabad. A traveller could easily lose days, if not weeks, in its espresso-serving cafés and strangely hassle-free bazaar – despite a lack of customers there was no hard sell here. We ate apricots plucked straight from the trees, haggled for tapestry-woven *kilim* rugs and watched a driver called Disco ad-lib a lunatic shaman dance that made a Keith Moon performance look on-kilter.

But eventually it was time to leave. We were transported by the aforementioned Disco to the nearby Nagyr Valley, a verdant slash of green, lush with fruit trees and scattered with remote villages. This was the staging post of our four-day trek into the mountains to scale – hopefully – Rush Peak. ▶

Opposite: The security guard at Baltit Fort displays his whiskers, while apricots dry on rooftops nearby; Nanga Parbat – the world's ninth-highest mountain





Bjorn Svensson/Superstock

‘I could feel myself melting into Karimabad. A traveller could easily lose days in its strangely hassle-free bazaar’

◀ We set off on our walk, waved off by a congregation of old men idly squatting in typical Pakistani fashion, and all wearing Hunza hats – the millinery equivalent of a shortcrust pie. The sun was glinting off the tongues of the Bualtar Glacier, our first obstacle, and the Barpu Glacier, our second.

Picking a path over the ice and shale was tough, but after a few hours we emerged on the flat plain beyond, walking between juniper, wild roses and rather amorous donkeys. Eventually our part-assembled camp appeared ahead, under construction by a stream, where half of the porters were busy putting up tents while the other half sat by and ‘supervised’.

It was a beautiful spot; all I could hear was the babble of the stream and the creak of the glacier slowly flexing its way down from the white-tipped peaks above.

That evening we gathered around the campfire and the porters turned male-voice choir, one of them pounding a beat on a plastic barrel while some sang and others performed the region’s stuttery dance.

“Come on! Join in!” they entreated, but I confess we were cowards and declined.

“Sing, then,” they countered, “like we’ve sung for you!”

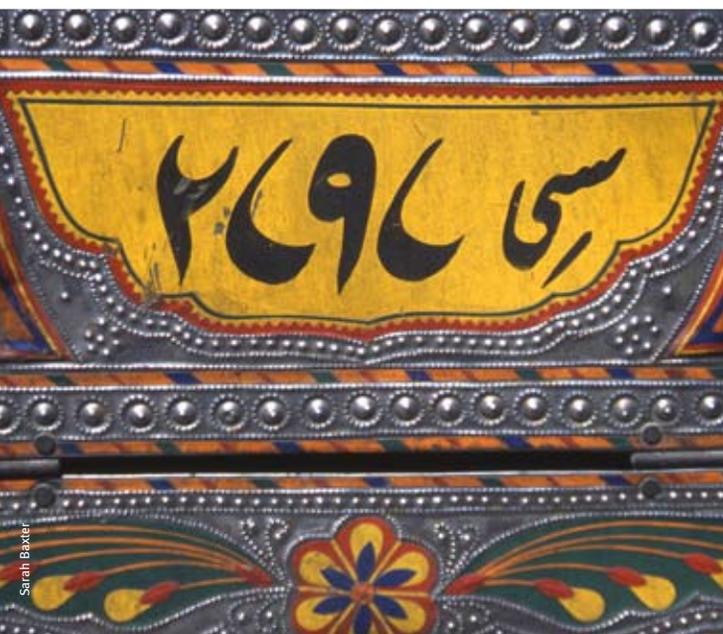
A shadowy array of beseeching faces gazed across the flames. We had no choice. But what to sing?

For the record, I can tell you that, when camped out beyond the middle of nowhere under a canopy of stars and required to step up to the mike, ‘Yellow Submarine’ and ‘Help!’ work well; ‘Old MacDonald Had a Farm’ does not. The porters’ songs were about beauty and love (“Your eyes are like oceans, you turn my words to poetry”); we moo-ed like cows. It was not my finest hour.

They seemed to bear no grudge the next the day however, waking us up with ‘bed tea’ before guiding us up a mountain. It was a relentless climb; the sun was hot and the altitude – topping 4,000m now – was sapping. But the views! Mountain after mountain, tumbling over one another in all directions. Suffice it to say that Pakistani lyrics were more suited to its description than any of mine.

Powered by a curious picnic of tuna, crackers and ‘Simply Irresistible’ chocolate (which wasn’t), we eventually reached Rush Lake (4,694m), a spot that in other countries would have been besieged by trekkers but was deserted here. We were hot ▶

Above: The 765-year-old Baltit Fort, the crowning glory of Karimabad, was painstakingly restored in the 1990s



‘Brazen, snow-capped and emphatic, K2 pierced the sky’

◀ and sweaty and the water was ice-cold – did we dare take the plunge? What the hell: I ran, fully clothed, into the freezing lake, much to the shock of the porters.

I’d dried out before the sun disappeared and the temperature fell. At night we huddled together, cross-legged, in the dining tent to feast on Khan’s magic creations. He was cool as a cucumber, our chef, in his shades, purple bandana and cowboy hat. Out of nowhere he produced vast buffets, and looked on with a quiet smile as we set to devouring it.

We needed the energy. The next morning we were up with the dawn for our visual and literal high point: Rush Peak. Walking across fields flecked by flowers and nibbled by sheep, to a slope of shonky rocks, we made our way to the 5,100m summit. It was uneasy going, breath hard to come by, but the promise led us on. It was a glorious day – not

a cloud in the sky – as if we were being rewarded for making it this far in a country no one seemed to want us to visit.

And there it was: the view from the top. K2 pierced the sky, hazy but brazen in the distance, ably supported by a cast of other snow-capped Karakorams. Take that, the world’s second-highest mountain and its chums gestured emphatically to anyone watching – a geological finger-up to the doubters who would have seen me anywhere but here.

I felt victorious, for making a summit and for finding adventure, kindness, ridiculousness and mind-blowing wow in a country that hasn’t just fallen off the travel map, but been screwed up and all but binned. I don’t know what the future holds for Pakistan, but I hope you’ve at least made it to here with me and gleaned an inkling of what a place it is.

There: you can stop reading now. ■

Clockwise from right: Rush Lake (4,694m), tempting for a plunge after a long climb; humble truck or work of art?; Wakheel hides his striking blue-green eyes under his red cap

Pakistan & me Five travellers on why they love the pariah state



CARON TAN, passionate traveller

“Where are you going? Are you sure?” These were typical reactions to my travel plans to northern Pakistan. How unfair such negative reactions proved to be! It was the trip of a lifetime.

Pakistan’s Northern Areas are home to wonderfully friendly, hospitable people, fantastic historical diversity, myriad languages and cultures and exquisite mountain scenery, with many of the world’s 8,000m peaks close by. You can travel by Jeep on the eighth Wonder of the World, the Karakoram Highway; explore the beautiful Hunza Valley, with its apricot trees; and trek up the Baltoro Glacier to Concordia and further on to the base camp at K2, the second-highest mountain on the planet. These are just some of the many memories of a super trip enjoyed in a relaxing and safe environment.

What else can I say? Experience it for yourself. You won’t regret it. I didn’t: I have since returned twice!

SYRA MUNIR, traveller and volunteer

My second trip to Pakistan in 2005 was in response to the earthquake that struck and devastated thousands of lives in Kashmir. I walked on a land ripped open and was touched by the courage of the people who started rebuilding their lives.

Living and working in Pakistan has not always been easy. Despite the daily challenges I experienced as a female I lived an independent life. I rented a flat in Islamabad on my own, and never felt threatened or worried about my security.

It’s a peaceful city, largely made up of diplomats, civil servants and middle-class society. That sense of security was not confined to Islamabad: on my travels in the Northern Areas I felt the same.



RACHAEL JACK, former Head of Biology, Gilgit University

Pakistan is such a contradictory country: it has so much unfulfilled promise, and seems to be addicted to self-harm. Much of what is reported, while justified (though *not* in the case of the witless

cover of *Time* magazine last autumn: ‘The most dangerous country in the world isn’t Iraq...’ Grrrrrrrrrr), is misleading.

It is not a backward-looking country, but it is an old-fashioned one, in both the best and worst senses. Certainly this feature of the national psyche has its darker side – chauvinism is alive and flourishing, and can take a very ugly form when mixed with a peculiar interpretation of honour.

But in a country where the activities of ‘miscreants’ are still reported, there is still an old-fashioned sense of courtesy, generosity and genuine hospitality that those who take the time to visit cannot help but notice.

SOHAIL AZAR, TravelPak founder

Pakistan is so many things to me on so many different levels. It’s where I can interact with a variety of people in the chaos of Lahore; where I feel I can do what I like when I like.

It’s also where I visit my relatives and try to understand who and how they are, and what it was like for them living in a country known for its poor human rights record.

I’m fiercely proud of the ancient culture and heritage. And then there’s the peace I find at the roof of the world among the mountains: it’s here I get some perspective on my own life.

It was a moment when all of this was happening around me – the culture, the people, the history and the mountains – that it dawned on me no one seemed to be visiting Pakistan or actually knew anything about it. So I made it my mission to do something about that – and TravelPak was born!



ATIF ZAHID, entrepreneur from Lahore

I was born and brought up in Pakistan, and I have a strong affiliation with the culture, environment, architecture and geography that make Pakistan one of a kind.

The rich, healthy culture makes me feel full of love and life. And the loving and hospitable nature of the people make you feel at home in every corner of Pakistan,

If Pakistan can improve in terms of literacy, economy and developing better infrastructure then it will be the best place to live and work.

PS I’m afraid I couldn’t write about the girls, which are the main reason I love Pakistan!

