



It's all Greek in Pakistan

If you like an exotic party, you can't do much better than the Kalash spring festival, held annually in the valleys of Burnboret, Birir and Rumbur, in northern Pakistan.

The Kalash, a tiny minority of 4,000, are the last of the pagan tribes to inhabit the Hindu Kush, and they claim to be descendants of the Greeks who swept through the region led by Alexander the Great. Ask them where they are from and they reply, "Tisim" — the west — although, despite their distinctly European looks and love of olives, no DNA evidence for their Hellenism has been found.

The Kalash religion, a form of Aryanism, is changing. Where once they prayed to minor deities for specific needs — Munjam for food, Jestak for household necessities, the Jach for gardening — they now go straight to one god, Baimanni, for all their spiritual needs. The festival, known as Joshi, takes place in May, and thanks Baimanni for bringing the summer. Depending on the age of the participants, Joshi evokes either desperate urgency or joyful anticipation, because at the end of the three-day event the men will leave their women to lead their goats up into the high pastures, remaining there until mid-August.

Dancing and drinking are a big part of the festival. The mulberry wine is a better choice than the blinding home-distilled toro (white whisky), and there is enthusiastic consumption of locally sourced botanics. It is, therefore, no wonder that this quasi-medieval island of animism in an

ocean of Islam is revered to by Muslims as Karfiristan — the land of the nonbelievers.

If you want to go, TravelPak (0844 555 8855, traveipak.co.uk) has a 14-day trip to the 2013 event for £1,595pp. You'll need another £561 for returns to Islamabad with Turkish Airlines, booked at Ebookers.com. Or try Wild Frontiers (020 7736 3968, wildfrontiers.co.uk). Check the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website (fo.gov.uk) before you travel.