

North Pakistan 2001 - A shorter journey than actually planned.

We landed on the 10th of September, early in the morning in Islamabad. After we passed the immigration and the luggage delivery, we hurried from the international for the national part of the airport, because we had a reservation on the flight to Skardu. Everything ran so smoothly, we only realized in the departure building, waiting for the flight: we are Pakistan! Despite the apparently good weather however the flight was canceled : " tomorrow ". So we drove with a Suzuki into Rawalpindi, which we imagined quite differently. We did not find it so chaotically, not so loud and dirty, the air was better, it had much fewer traffic, no comparison with the large cities in India or Bangladesh. There was not very much to do in Rawalpindi. We stayed in Saddar Bazar, a quarter with many shops and restaurants, hotel and the GPO. We walked a little around the city, familiarized us at Pakistan, the people, the warmth, and bought us cloth (wash and wear) and let it sewn into one Shalwar Kameez for each of us, the traditional dress (for male and female) of the Pakistanis. The next morning we went to the airport again, checked in, and a half hour later we sat in the airplane to Skardu. It became somewhat queasy to us, when, before the start, a tape with an Islamic prayer sounded. Where does it probably go to? After start we flew toward the Karakoram. The mountains became very high and powerful, we flew past the Nanga Parpat, (8125m). In the approach on Skardu it became slowly clear to us, why it can be flown here only in good weather. The airplane made a very steep landing with a 360° turn over the valley basin in the sandy Indus valley.

Baltistan, Skardu is situated surrounded by high mountains in a broad valley, in which the Indus meanders. It had large sand banks, many slim poplar trees rised up into the blue sky. The view is clear, it winds often strongly and sandy, it is quite cool. Skardu, the center of the mountaineers, here the large expeditions to the high mountains start. I felt quite well here, because the width of the valley didn't give me the feeling to be surrounded by so high mountains. We explored the village, then the fort, which is situated picturesque on a hill over the city and the Indus, with a great view over the wideness of the Indus and the mountains. Where were the women? The whole village was full of men, but women were rarely found. After dinner, when we returned to our hotel, we saw the first pictures of the impacts in the USA. The next day we walked to the Satpara Lake, which took us approx. 3 hours, passing newer sections of the city, by a meager, brown valley, without many trees, up to the small artificial lake with a restaurant and a beautiful prospect on the lake and the steep mountains. We still walked another hour to the village Satpara, an accumulation of houses and fields in a green oasis. The people were somewhat shy, however very friendly. When we were returning, there was an amazing view of Skardu and the broad valley of the Indus.

The travel from Skardu to Gilgit in a minibus was breath taking. First the valley was wide with large sand surfaces and apricot trees, then it became closer after a bridge, at which all tourists had to step out and sign into a book, and the Indus flowed deeply in the valley, steep walls rose up into the blue sky. There was not much vegetation, from time to time there was a village and green fields in the unreal environment. After 5 hours, where the Indus and the Hunza River meet, the valley widens and the road from Skardu to Gilgit joins the Karakoram Highway (KKH). Everything still looked very deserted and empty, but the flat levels became sometimes green, again it had many trees and fields in the banks at the river. Gilgit is a center with many tourist shops, hotels and travel agencies. We had trouble to get along: where can we change cash, where is the office of the bus company, where we can eat something? And there were many tourists, also in our hotel! We were glad on the next day, when we left Gilgit in a full (not brimful) mini bus to the North on the Karakoram Highway into the Hunzatal. In the afternoon we arrived in Passu, a village surrounded by glaciers, which mouths came very close to the KKH, and scurrile pointed mountains.

The houses are enclosed fields and apple and apricot trees and. There were some women, which processed the fields, or maintained their garden in front of their houses. It was very calmly in the village, there was few traffic on the KKH, from time to time a fully loaded, and marvelously painted truck, went up the road, a jeep, a mini bus, perhaps a tourist on its fully laden bicycle. The inhabitants of Passu were extremely friendly, came to us, chatted gladly, also young girls. All spoke a good English. Here, the influence of the Ismaelits with its Imam Aga Khan is to be felt clearly. The inhabitants of the Hunzatal also don't look like Pakistanis, rather like Central Asians, they often have reddish-brown hair and light slitted eyes. The suspension bridges near Passu, are the landmark attraction of the area, shown for example on the envelope of the Lonely planet KKH book. From Passu, one has to go a little further down the river, and achieves soon the first suspension bridge; a few wires rope, which are strained over the broad river bed. Individual planks or branches are woven into the ropes, irregular in distance and thickness. With the hands holding the main rope, the tourists balance carefully from one side to the other, proudly to manage to cross, while the local carry heavy loads over the bridge. On the other side of the bridge, there is a flat area, which we in crossed one hour. After Zarabad, a small village with some fields and trees and a tractor, the way leads deeply down to the river bed, where two further suspension bridges

cross the river. The larger is not useable any more, individual rope and beams hang inclined, are missing or defective. The smaller has fewer and less irregular branches, but with a bit of exercise... After Hussaini, the village on the other side of the bridge, one crosses the KKH, and arrives on a steep track Borit (" salt ") Lake, surrounded by bald mountains, with a small hotel and a beautiful garden with many flowers. The way back to Passu leads by a stony valley on a hill chain with a fascinating outlook on the trenched white Passu glacier.

Shimshal is a remote village 60 km away from Passu. A narrow road, which is still under construction, winds itself up the valley, on one side, deep down is the raving river, on the other one the steep slope of the mountain. About 2/3 of the road is finished, for the remaining distance, one has to walk. After the jeep had unloaded us and our leader (Gul Mohammed), we were walking in a wild valley, sometimes a stone desert, from time to time there was a green surface on a hill or in the valley. There were several suspension bridges for crossing the Shimshal River. The valley is surrounded by high mountains, some of the highest covered with snow and ice. After approximately 6 hours we arrived in Kuk, a green oasis with a warm source and a hut for staying overnight and cooking. On the other side of the valley, a dark black glacier rises, which is topped by a 7800 m high ice giant. On the following day the valley was widening up, until we reached Shimshal Village at noon., There are 1000 inhabitants approximately living in the village, at an altitude of 2800 m. What a change, beforehand the brown dry area, now the village with green colored trees, houses and fields, on the which right now, the harvested was going on because of the threshing, the air was full of dust. We could stay with Gul's family, got acquainted with his whole relationship and their way of life. The house consisted of a large space without windows, only in the roof, there is hole attached, for the smoke. Behind it, in a corner, there is a kitchen. Around the middle of the room, there were rolled mats for sleeping. The whole family slept in the same space. The hospitality of the people in Shimshal was overwhelming. Everywhere in the village, we were invited for a tea, we got some apples or apricots. Gul visited all its uncles and cousins in the village. He had not been in Shimshal since one month, he was busy somewhere else with tourists. Every time he met someone who harvested the grain on a field, he went to him, took the sickle and helped to cut the grain. It is a tradition to help relatives with the harvest, even only for a few minutes. Thus we came slowly around the whole village, visited his uncle, who worked as a High of the Altitude Porter with expeditions. Rita rode on a yak, a black giant, which reminded me of a mixture from cow and elephant. We saw the school and mosque, both supported by the Aga Khan Foundation.

At noon on the following we started to return in direction to Passu, again staying overnight in Kuk. The view of the glacier and the high mountains were even more exciting, then the day before. Around noon of the next daily we achieved the camp, in the proximity, where the road began again. A small store, in which one buys food, or drinks a tea. There is an area, where the people from Shimshal store their goods temporarily, which where transported to there with a jeep, and carried in smaller quantities on foot to Shimshal (or let it carry). The drive back by jeep to Passu was quite adventurously, downhill it went faster than up the valley few days ago, always the deep abyss before eyes.

Again in Passu, we decided after one day, to drive again to Gilgit, since in the village, we could only get very few information about the situation with the USA and Afghanistan. In Gilgit there was Internet, telephone and television. On this Friday the anti USA demonstrations began, after the Friday prayers in the whole country. One told us to remain in the hotel during the demonstrations. We could clearly hear the crowds, how they shouted their slogans. After a futile attempt, (it on Friday afternoon) to achieve the Swiss embassy by telephone: "call again on Monday " we decided, to postpone our flight back home. We didn't know, what would occur, if the USA would begin the Afghanistan bombardment ... Did I only have the feeling, or regarded us the people in the city differently, than the first time we were in Gilgit; no longer curiously reservedly, but hostile, distrustfully? We booked a new flight, from Lahore to Dubai, and had now still another week time to spend in Pakistan. We drove again north towards Karimabad, on half distance between Gilgit and Passu, the principal place in the Hunza valley. After approximately four hours of drive one achieves Karimabad, which lies highly over the KKH on the mountain slope. The dominating Baltit Fort is above the village, the former housing of the Mir (king). From Karimabad one had a fantastic view from the Rakaposhi (7788m) and the Diran Paek (7257 m). On the early morning the view was particularly clear. The village has many hotels, restaurants and tourist shops, but after the 11th September, there were only few tourists, everything was very calm. The tourist season was terminated prematurely. We walked through many small fields to of Eagles Nest hotel in Meliashkar, highly over Altit and Karimabad on 3000 m, we past at houses with beautiful gardens with many flowers. From here one has a good view on the villages, the valley and the mountains. Altit village is less touristy then Karimabad, a small village with close lanes and houses. The Altit away, it is situated on a cliff, hundreds meters above the river, was unfortunately closed, because of renovation. We spent three days in Karimabad,

then we drove again to Gilgit, and booked the bus to Rawalpindi for the following day. We were the third time in Gilgit, always in the same hotel, each time it had fewer guests. Instead of the 30, as the first time, we were now only four. In the evening we visited a Polo tournament. From far we could hear the cheering of the people in the stadium, which was fully filled, all men, Rita was the only woman. She did not feel comfortable, although we got some good places to spot the action. Polo is a very rapid game, in which the players with their horses try to hit the small wooden sphere with their racquets. (They don't always hit it)

The bus ride from Gilgit to Rawalpindi was very long and arduously. After 15 hours drive in during the night time, on the bumpy KKH, we reached Rawalpindi at sunrise. With a taxi we drove to Islamabad to Emirates Office, where we got our new tickets. Islamabad is created generously, consists of wide streets with large trees and parks. The roads were full of "pro government demonstrations". Often whole school marched with Pakistan flags in direction to the parliament. A lot of busses also carried flags, but everything was calm and arranged. We visited the Shah Faisal mosque, an enormous modern building disguised with white marble, inside it was held very simple. The four rocket like minarets do appear rather unusual. On the next day we drove 4 hours by bus to Lahore, on an empty motorway. The outlying districts of the city were very green, we saw many trees and gardens, everything looked calmly. The center of the city is chaotic. It's loud, there is too much traffic, the air is full of smoke

From the busses, the taxi and three wheelers. The roads and lanes were very narrow, with many bazaars. The Lahore Fort and the Badshahi mosque are like an oasis of the silence, a generous area, which reminded us much to Dehli or Agra.

Unfortunately we spent only 3 weeks in North Pakistan, we flew on the 29th September from Lahore to Dubai. I had the feeling, the whole country was a bit more organized, than India or Bangladesh. It was rather simple, e.g. to get a bus ticket. We always found reasonable hotels. Only the food was not good. We never had a negative experience, also not after, or because of the 11th September.

We were surprised by the (reserved) friendliness of the people, and fascinated by the landscapes and the mountains.

We unfortunately were at the false time at the correct place.

Andi Hefti, November 2001