

HITCHHIKING & HOSPITALITY

6 WEEKS IN PAKISTAN



They were chanting, beating their chests loudly as many cried out in pain and agony. This was unlike anything I'd ever seen before, and though I didn't personally identify with the religiously-charged actions, I felt the emotion sizzling in the air. Thousands of Shia Muslim men had gathered on the 6th of Muharram to mourn the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, grandson of Prophet Muhammad, and his family. In unison, they raised their arms to the rhythm of lamentations broadcast over loudspeakers, bringing their fists down forcefully upon their chests in a deep sadness (this ritual is known as Mamtam in Pakistan or Latmiyyah in Arab countries). I looked on as I stood on a rooftop — the local military had invited me up to take photos — enthralled by the electric energy below me. And through it all, **though the scene was intense, I never felt unsafe.**



When I re-entered the crowd, strangers greeted me curiously, politely. While respectfully covered in an abaya and hijab, I was still recognizable as the only foreigner and only woman nearby. For women, modest dress goes a long way in Islamic countries. Loose clothing, long sleeves, and a headscarf (even if not required) show respect and make interactions smoother. At one point, I was suddenly completely surrounded by over 30 men, some bleeding, who just wanted to say salaam alaikum to me.



If you ever find yourself in Pakistan, learn a bit of Urdu. Even just salaam alaikum (peace be upon you) and shukriya (thank you) are great. These men's kindness cut through the chaos and set the tone for my time in Pakistan. I arrived in Skardu alone. A kind businessman on the plane offered me a ride from the airport to my hotel; I was growing to realize what people mean when they discuss Pakistani hospitality. Hitchhiking here wasn't transactional. Most drivers refused payment, so I learned to offer conversation, a small gift, or snacks. At the hotel, which cost \$7 (including breakfast), the owner not only lent me a motorcycle but also taught me to ride it on the mountain roads. Despite others' efforts to dissuade a female from doing this activity (something I often experienced as local men fought me over my own safety), we spent a week driving up into many of northern Pakistan's hidden valleys. One day, we hopped on a local jeep with 20 people clinging to it. It carried us up a rocky mountainside, past women carrying heavy sacks (one of the first times I'd seen women outdoors in a while) and children playing in the mud, until we reached Shigarthung, one of the most remote villages in the world. Hitchhiking in Pakistan felt like stepping into another time: Electricity, phones, or roads could be scarce, and a 2 hour ride often turned into 7. I learned to go with flexibility & patience and was rewarded with genuine experiences. Because I was a guest and a female, I received special care and was looked after like family. The Shigarthung villagers invited me into their mud-and-stick homes, serving salty pink chai & clay-like flowers I mashed in my hands before eating.



Throughout my 6 weeks, I was often offered chai as a symbol of welcome and warmth, and refusing hospitality was never an option — especially not with the Aunties. None of these people had ever met a gori (foreign woman) before. Though we didn't share the same beliefs or language, we communicated through food, expressions, and gestures. They looked at me with curiosity, but also with the same warmth I'd felt everywhere in Pakistan. This became the rhythm of my travels: ride after ride, hitchhiking on top of vans, sharing space in trucks, being offered fruit from apricot farms, eating free meals in cafes, or being offered accommodation without hesitation. People checked on me constantly ("Where are you going? Are you hungry?"). It wasn't suspicion, but protection. That being said, I trusted everyone and no one, always aware of that .001% of any population who aren't so friendly. But time and time again, I was reminded that hospitality wasn't conditional; it was simply life. That's why I return to that protest story. Because even on a day filled with grief and passion, when it would have been easy for fear to take hold, kindness and respect still defined my experience. I had heard rumors about Pakistani hospitality before going, but living it in the mountains of Gilgit-Baltistan — being welcomed into homes, into cars, into moments of people's daily lives — was something else entirely.

