**Exploring the Unknown – Hunza Valley, Pakistan**

**By Tew Chit Beng**

Pakistan is not a common destination on people’s travel list. When our friends asked why we chose Pakistan for our holiday, their follow-up question was, “Is it safe?!”

The beautiful views (which were unexpected), the friendliness of the local people and the delicious cuisine are some of the reasons why Pakistan is incredibly underrated. Karakoram Road is the most epic road trip ever and is highly recommended. It was truly a great experience to visit the Hunza Valley, a hidden gem that most of the world have yet to discover.

**Arrival at Karachi**

Two weeks before our scheduled departure, the Pakistani government still had not lifted the airspace ban at Lahore Airport, which had been slated to reopen on 1 July 2019. We decided against postponing or cancelling the trip and were determined to find an alternative route, flying instead into Karachi and delaying our trip by three days.

On 10 July, we landed at Karachi International Airport and began our excursion into the unknown. A slight drizzle greeted us on arrival, as if we had brought it from home, as rain was unusual for that time of year.

I was wide awake at 6am the next morning with little sleep but full of excitement to watch the life outside the hotel as the day broke before 5am. To my dismay, I found the neighbourhood sound asleep though it was bright – apparently the locals don’t get up until 11am!

After enjoying three delicious bowls of Mutton Paya (lamb leg soup) for breakfast at the Ramada Hotel, we set out for a half-day tour of Karachi, where we covered Clifton Beach, Jehangir Kothari Parade, Jinnah Mausoleum and Mohatta Palace Museum, before heading to the airport to catch our flight to Islamabad.

**Dinner on a Hill in Islamabad**

Our first dinner in Pakistan, shortly after our arrival in Islamabad, was at Monal Restaurant located at the city’s hilltop. It was a lovely opportunity to enjoy fine dining and the great ambience of the city before heading out to the Hunza Valley hinterland. The view of Islamabad was especially spectacular during sunset.

**The Start of Our Journey to Heaven on Earth**

The next morning, we woke up at 3.30am to catch our early flight to Gilgit. The view of the Sleeping Beauty, the highest peak of the Himalayas in Pakistan, was spectacular during our flight. We could see melting glaciers feeding the Indus River, which flows through the village against the rugged mountain backdrop. The pilot enthusiastically advised us to absorb the experience as if he was flying a chartered flight to see the Himalayas. The commercial flight on the 50-seater ATR plane by Pakistan International Airlines was indeed value for money!

**Hunza Valley**

On arrival, we embarked on our journey heading out of Gilgit on the Karakoram Highway to explore the Hunza Valley on a bus for the next four days with our local guide and friend, Colonel Imran.

The Karakoram Highway is perhaps one of the only places in the world where you can admire an 8,000-m high mountain, like the Karakoram (KK) mountain ranges, from the window of your bus. We were all in awe of the beauty of the mountain ranges during our journey.

The Passu Glacier and Attabad Lake were outstandingly spectacular. They were so picturesque that one would not realise they existed in Pakistan. I could not stop taking photographs throughout our journey.

Everybody enjoyed the boat ride at Attabad Lake, absorbing the beauty of the lake and its surroundings. In winter, skiing on the lake and the many slopes is a popular activity at the KK mountain ranges in the Upper Hunza region.

We were also fortunate to enjoy a traditional Hunza lunch at a local home. We savoured sweet, succulent mangoes at a picnic spot next to a waterfall and a swift river, as well as a special meal, which included locally farmed trout, prepared by an ex-army chef in the Hunza Valley.

Our excursion took us northeast of Pakistan as far as Sost, the last inhabited town before the Pakistan-China border. It would be another two and a half to three hours to the border from Sost.

**Visit to Pink Himalayan Salt Mine**

Pakistan is naturally endowed with large reserves of pink Himalayan rock salt in the form of salt mines in Khewra. Pink salt is very high in demand all around the world and is exported in large volumes from Pakistan. These rock salts were named the Pink Himalayan Salt back in 1986.

**Feeling like Celebrities**

We felt like celebrities everywhere we went as the locals would often ask to take photos with us! Was it due to the scarcity of foreigners in the country or due to the strong Pakistan-China Friendship relations?

**New Discoveries**

During this trip, we had the privilege of relishing various local dishes; viewing the majestic, stunning and breathtaking mountains and pristine lakes; and mingling with the good-natured and warm-hearted locals of Hunza Valley and Islamabad. In fact, I returned with incredible stories and photos to show the many reasons why Pakistan should be on everyone’s travel list.

The crime rate in Hunza and Gilgit is close to zero, and the peaceful conditions in Islamabad and Karachi prove that the public’s perception of Pakistan’s high security risk is unfounded.

It was definitely an unimaginable dream for me, if not for Shakilah who organised the trip from KL and Colonel Imran who made it happen in Pakistan.

Many thanks to Colonel Imran for his great efforts and exemplary hospitality in ensuring that we got to see, eat, experience and enjoy as much as we could during our short journey with him. He made this trip memorable and proved to us that Pakistan should be on everyone’s list. He also took great care of us as if we were family during this trip. *Sukria*!

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*For those interested in a similar adventure in Pakistan, Colonel Imran is reachable through his local representative, Shakilah Meraslam, at 013-3882325.*

*RSGC Member Tew Chit Beng (CB) recently returned to Malaysia after spending most of his working life as an expatriate in the oil and gas industry, having lived (and played golf) in seven different countries. Besides practising golf three days a week and targeting to reach his lowest handicap before it tapers off from age, his other passions include travelling, wine and food.*