

A Week in Kashmir

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Our first stop was Keran, 3 hours ahead of Muzaffarabad. The AJK Tourism Department has a small hotel in Keran on the river bank called Tourist Resort. Right across the river at this hotel is the Indian-occupied Kashmir. And yes, there has been firing at this place from across the border which happened around the start of this year.



The building in the photo above that stands out a little is actually a mosque and the source of Azaan at the resort. You could sit there for hours to take your mind off things with the noise of the flowing river keeping you company, with the Azaan joining in as well every few hours. This is a close-up of the mosque:



Next to that mosque and along the bank, are some seemingly empty homes (below). Homes which were vacated when things got tense between the two

countries. From where I was seated, the sight of it was beautiful but disturbing as well. Not to forget your life could end there because of a bullet from just across the river.



A few kilometres before Keran there's a path through the local bazaar leading up to Kutton. On the road to Kutton, there's a small powerplant that produces around 2 MW of electricity for the whole area nearby. And there's a breathtaking view of the area, as you can see above, from the shaky bridge going across the river.



Between Kutton and Keran, there's a place in the mountains called Ath Maqaam. There's a village there named Lalaji, where our driver and his family live. They're true Kashmiris and the perfect example of what the locals there are like. They live in very, very similar wooden homes with at least 3 rooms and a proper view of the mountains. These houses are really close to each other and may be on different levels on the mountain. But relatives live next to each other. Where I visited, 3 brothers bought land next to each other in 70/80s, built their homes there and now their children (including our driver) and grandchildren live there, surrounded by acres of fruit trees including apples, apricots, plums, and even walnuts and oregano are available in the villages. It's a completely different world there. These are simple people who keep their relationships with their neighbors, whichever brother, sister, cousin or friend that may be, at the top of their priorities. They're surrounded by the beauty of nature and live their own, yet connected lives with joy. However, that doesn't mean life is completely peaceful for them and they don't have any worries or fears.



All the homes in this area face a mountain on one side. That view you see above may be beautiful but that's India between the pillars. The photo may not make it visible but the wood has holes and the pillars have splintered sides. They're cracked at some places and seem ready to snap any second. These people have no warning signs before firing incidents occur. Once they hear a shot, a lot of people go into small bunkers which they've built. Our driver's made a small stone building that's used to hide in now, right behind his house and in front of his sister's. His relatives from the three to four homes next to his rush to it to get away from the bullets. The stone is in front of them to protect them and the house in front of that. Others don't go there and have to get down in their homes behind a wall and pray. Once the firing stops, the damage is assessed and life resumes for them, as normally as it can.

Above Keran is the Upper Neelum Valley which has a series of restaurants and lodges on the road that only offer a view of the area below. In the photo, left to the river is India and on the right is Pakistan.



Upper Neelum also has really really clear skies and puffy clouds to offer. The red roof belongs to a resort/restaurant at the top of one of the hills.



Onwards from Keran is Kel. Kel is a 4 to 5-hour drive from Keran while stopping at a small place called Sharda in between. The whole route is marked by sharp turns, large rocks sticking out the mountain face threatening to rip open your vehicle and beautiful waterfalls.



Rain makes the drive even worse. The distance between Karan and Kel is approximately 40 km but as mentioned before, takes 4 hours to get through. Kel is at such a height that the clouds often obstruct your view of the mountains.



Kel has a never ending bazaar on the left and army setups on the right, most prominent being the Brigade's Mess.



The back side of the mess offers a stunning view of the Kel village (below) with a variety of colored ceilings and wooden homes enclosed by the river and mountains on three sides.





Onto Taobat and Arangkel now. Taobat is a grueling 4-hour drive from Kel and in a way, the end of Kashmir. There's a point just ahead of Taobat beyond which civilians aren't allowed to go. The road to Taobat is rocky the whole way, full of steep climbs and a pain in the back and only jeeps can make this journey because of the difficulty of the route. However, looking out the window on the ride makes you forget all about that. The view along the way is jaw-dropping: clear skies and huge clouds, beautiful mountains, bright homes and waterfalls between ice blocks.



The river gradually gets narrower as you progress from Keran to Taobat but it's equally powerful in most places. Many buildings here, especially schools and mosques have solar panels on the roof for electricity.



Taobat's prominent feature is a river and mountainside view only, and it complements the scenes that you see on the way here.



The whole area is covered by many shades of green and has some guesthouses/resorts on the hills near the river for some peace and quiet.



There's a fish farm near the river that you can visit to observe some trout.



And then it's another 4-hour drive back to Kel. There's a place between Kel and Taobat called Halmat where there is an army setup and mess where you can stop for a while. Arangkel is a 3-hour trek from Kel but a one minute ride by chairlift. Couldn't go there because of rain. On the way back to Kel, however, we got to see some preparations being made for a wedding procession:



Heading back to Lahore from Kel, we stopped at Sharda. There's a small qila/temple structure at the top that you can see after climbing 60 stone slabs/steps. It's in the process of restoration with Sharda University and the army working on it.



And from here we had around 12 hours of travel back to Lahore. That was the end of my visit to Kashmir and I'd recommend everyone to go see it at least once before they go on to see the beauty in other countries.