

PRIDE of Pakistan



Text and Photography:
Simon and Lisa Thomas

At 6:30 a.m. the day is already hot. Alex and Nico, our new riding companions, are ready to ride. As I strap down the last of the bags, my attention is grabbed as a young and slightly awkward lone Iranian soldier runs into the hotel yard, clearly out of breath. "How is he meant to escort us to the border? What's he going to do?" asks Alex. "No car, no bike." I swap around my bags, and my waterproof carryall quickly becomes a makeshift pillion seat as our young escort climbs aboard and finds his perch. Two miles later our small group is safely delivered at the Iran-Pakistan frontier.



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group as we inspect the two dirt-encrusted rooms, both barely visible under a heavy layer of dust and insect dung. We thank the owner but offer to camp on the rock-strewn ground up front and pay him the same rate.

Lisa sleeps beside me as I peer out from the tent. We have a lone guard, an older man, posted as a sentry; he'd watched silently from the shadows earlier as we pitched our tents, his demeanor giving away the seriousness in which he took his new role as our protector. I feel lucky to have him here but equally unworthy for taking up his time.

The shrill horn of a 4x4 has me whipping my head toward the gate as a single bright lamp is swung in our direction. Lisa's look of concern mirrors my own: "This could

be it: We're about to be kidnapped and our poor old guard is going to be helpless." A camouflaged 4x4 pulls aggressively into the yard, sending dust into the air. I'm on my feet and out of the tent in seconds and can make out the menacing shape of a 50-caliber machine gun mounted to the chassis. I use the word mounted lightly: Two stout tree branches and a plank form the brace that holds this formidable weapon.

"Hello, hello, everything is good?" asks the energetic sergeant. "We heard that you are here and we come to see you are OK!" Our fears are quickly settled.

"Things are OK, you are good?" he asks again, until happy with our reply. Our visitors speed off into the night, gone as quickly as they'd arrived. Slowly we all

Past the gates, the old and weather-worn board reads, "Islamic Republic of Pakistan." The smiling face of the customs officer inside the squat, white-washed shack is a welcome change from the stonelike scowls of his Iranian counterpart.

"Have you had lunch?" the officer asks as he thumps the last heavy stamp into the largest ledger any of us have ever seen.

Ten minutes later, Nico, Alex, Lisa, and I are sitting at a heavy and worn table, each wearing the same bemused grin. "I think I'm going to love Pakistan!" I mumble as I swallow a mouthful of thick, delicious curry. "Welcome to my country, welcome to Pakistan," states our new benefactor, popping his head around the door. Our offers of cash payment for lunch are forcefully declined.

We are aware of the potential dangers of riding into Pakistan; for westerners, the risk of kidnapping is all too real. This year alone seven aid workers have been snatched and still remain held by their captors. We ride

smooth asphalt a short four miles to the meeting point with the mandatory military convoy that will escort us throughout Pakistan. Warm handshakes and smiles are easily exchanged; our passports are checked and promptly and politely handed back (which wasn't always the case when we were in Iran). With the bikes rumbling happily beneath us, we pull in behind the small military 4x4, where two rifle-carrying guards hang their legs over the tailgate. Ahead of us, a long ribbon of sun-bleached asphalt cuts through an otherwise flat desert landscape. I'm in my element. I love deserts.

As the last squint of a blood red sunset flickers out of sight, we pull up into the tiny town of Yakmack. We are tired and dusty from the day's efforts. We've swapped escorts four times today. Just a few miles from the Afghan border, our guards are visibly on edge. With rifles at the ready, they recon the small derelict building to our right; we have no idea why until it's made clear we are to sleep here for the night. A fit of good-natured laughter erupts from our small



settle back down. What a day. Welcome to Pakistan!

Sleeping with the Enemy

Today has been long and hot, although we've swapped escorts fewer times than yesterday while en-route. We have definitely earned every one of the 253 miles we've covered. In the dark we negotiate the chaotic outskirts of Quetta, mindful to keep up with our guards. We've not ridden in a city with pollution like this since Bamako in West Africa. Still wearing our dark visors, we have no choice but to ride with our visors open. Acrid, dust-filled air chokes us and stings our eyes. Our frantic waves to our escorts to pull over are disregarded.

Worryingly, I acknowledge a very distinct shift in the body language of our escorts up ahead. Their earlier nonchalant mood is replaced by a newfound intensity and edgy focus, their smiles of earlier now replaced by fierce scowls. From the back of their 4x4 they scan the street, simultaneously sweeping their weapons left to right and back again, the safeties on their weapons off and each soldier holding his "action" finger alongside the trigger. Quetta is known to be Taliban-friendly; at least three Taliban warlords are known to live within the city. We're a big, rolling target: The locals know it, the soldiers know it, and we know it!



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It's midnight as Lisa and I lie back to enjoy the fictitious safety but much-needed familiarity of our tent. We've chosen to erect it in the grassy compound of the Bloom Hotel, a relative oasis complete with friendly staff. A high wall adds to that feeling of security. We have been given strict orders not to leave the confines of the hotel until our escort arrives tomorrow morning. As if?

We leave Quetta without incident, the city feeling less hostile in broad daylight. That night we reach the city of Sukkur and sleep soundly at the optimistically named Decent Inn. Today we'll push northeast for Multan.

Cruising at a steady 50 mph, we ride clear of the smaller backstreets as a hot, dry wind pushes us from the south. The sun breaks the horizon over my left shoulder and I'm in photographic purgatory, unable

to stop and pull out my camera. Around me the coarse landscape is assuaged, bathed now in the soft pink of the morning's kiss. A mix of morning fog and the smoke from a thousand freshly lit chapatti ovens creates a fairy tale haze that diffuses the light. As our road elevates, we watch as the grayish blue waters of the Indus River simply vanish into the mist beneath us. The scene is nothing short of breathtaking.

Our convoy pulls up on the outskirts of town, and after dismounting my bike I rattle off a dozen shutter clicks while we wait for the next escorts who will see us safely north. The stench of rotting garbage fouls the air as the rising sun quickly heats trash piles that are scattered everywhere.

Two larger 4x4s skid to a halt 10 feet behind me, as eight heavily armed men jump down and make the rounds of introductions, handshakes, and document checks.



We plough into rush hour traffic en route for the Sindbad Hotel, one of the very few hotels in Multan that will accept foreign guests in this current climate of hostility and retribution. Our ride now is fast becoming a game of “dodge certain death,” as with alarming regularity we bump or narrowly dodge cars, trucks, pedestrians, and scooters that buzz us like mechanical mosquitoes. Twenty feet ahead, the dark blue Hilux we’ve been following for hours now barrels into another congested alley; it is all we can do to keep up as we try not to kill or be killed. Behind us, Nico and Alex are having their first real taste of rule-less traffic riding, where anything goes. Inside my own helmet space I allow myself a grin, having dealt with this a thousand times but remembering my first taste of this octane-induced madness.

Let Loose in Lahore

The Sindbad Hotel is now two days behind us. We were delayed after Alex was hit with a nasty tummy bug. Poor guy, it’s all he can do to ride right now. On the outskirts of Lahore, our escorts wave us on as they peel off in another direction. We are left to our own devices for the first time in what seems like an age. Lahore, considered both the cultural and political heart of Pakistan’s famed Punjab Province, has a history that goes back over a millennium. With 10 million inhabitants, this one-time colonial city is one of the most populated in the world.

As we ride deeper into the city, the narrow streets widen into elegant boulevards flanked by high-bricked walls, ornate gates, and well-groomed gardens. The

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Both crews are armed with higher-tech weaponry than our previous protection details; rifles, side arms, and knives slung around their limbs. Rounds of ammo are tucked into small packs that hang on their belts.

By midafternoon we are riding the curves of Highway 5, the main route north. Small shantytowns dot this dry and windswept landscape. Our eyes have to adjust quickly as we ride through the shadows cast by tall, ochre, sandstone walls that come right up to the road. In the distance, chocolate-colored mountains fringe the horizon. We pass countless brightly painted cafes, each decked out in the insignia of some brand or another: Coca Cola, Sprite, Nescafé. Each cafe seems brighter than the last, and each one demands our gaze.

As we enter Multan at speed, the older officer in the lead 4x4 climbs out of the back of the Hilux, and like a Hollywood stuntman stands on the rear tailgate, lifts his rifle, and, with the butt of his gun hoisted high, threatens the slower drivers to our left. Move over or else is his unmistakable message! Clicking up quickly through the gears, I chuckle to myself. I’m unsure whether I’m happy with his work ethic or simply embarrassed that we are the cause of such an act of visual aggression.

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sweet smell of cooking curries wafts from the alleys that branch out from the main street. The atmosphere is noticeably less tense than in the other cities we've visited.

The Indus Hotel provides us sanctuary for 4,000 rupees (\$71), and we select it for its secure parking and security. The four of us share a room to spread the cost.

We haul our heavy limbs out of bed and quickly kiss good-bye to any idea of getting an early start. Breakfast is two fried eggs made all the better as we slurp on sweet black coffee. As I throw the last bag onto the bike, I recognize we've attracted a crowd of 30 or so onlookers, each watching our every move. It strikes me how at ease we have become with this kind of group inspection.

As we ride out of Lahore, written in large English letters the sign reads, "The Great Trunk Road." It'll lead all the way to the Indian border. Lahore's traffic is living up to its reputation. Inside my helmet I laugh out loud as we swerve, dodge, and squeeze past a melee of cars, erratic rickshaws, and the mandatory carts being pulled by exhausted donkeys, all while we are swarmed by thousands of riders on 125cc Hondas, Suzukis, or Jialings.

At the border we halt at the first military checkpoint. Our last minute in Pakistan is spent in the same way as our first as we accept a kind offer of a chat and chai. We park the bikes and are soon recounting a few of our experiences in Pakistan between sips of hot, sweet, milky tea. Our khaki-dressed friends casually sport new, fully automatic rifles slung over their backs.

We suddenly feel the weight of history and ceremony as we ride through the decorated gates of Pakistan and pass under the archway of India. The vast new sign we pass reads, "Welcome to India, the Largest Democracy in the World!" Bring it on! **RR**

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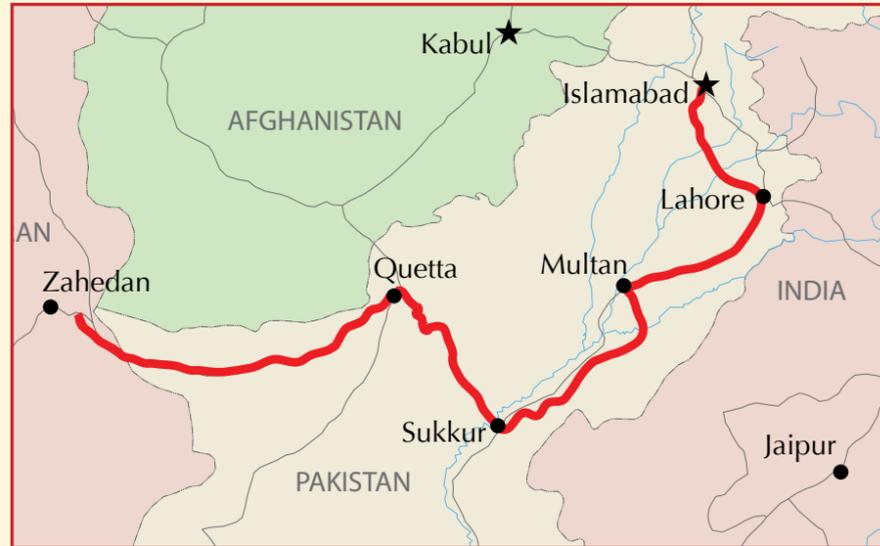
Facts & Information

Pakistan

Total Mileage
Approximately 1,594 miles



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Always consult more-detailed maps for touring purposes.

In General

Pakistan has a diverse landscape and some of the highest mountains in the world at over 26,250 feet. The languages are Persian and Urdu.

Pakistan is a Muslim country. Both sexes should dress modestly at all times, i.e., shoulders and legs covered in public. Women should cover their heads in mosques and in rural areas. Take special note of customs during the month of Ramadan.

The currency is the rupee. Larger cities and towns exchange most major foreign currencies. U.S. dollars are the most widely accepted currency. ATMs are available in major cities. The best time to travel in the south is November to March; in the north, April to October.

Visas

U.S. citizens require a visa obtained in advance. A Carnet de Passage is required for your vehicle, plus registration papers, liability insurance, and an International Driving Permit (IDP). Always carry identification.

The most popular (and only legal) overland crossing between India and Pakistan is at Wagah, about 18 miles east of Lahore. It is also possible to enter from China via the Khunjerab Pass and from Kabul in Afghanistan.

Food & Lodging

Cuisine varies from region to region. International and fast food are popular in the cities. Meat dishes are common; food is similar to North Indian cuisine.

Pakistanis often eat with their hands by scooping up food with a piece of baked bread (naan). It is considered proper to eat meals only with the right hand. Consuming alcohol and pork is illegal.

There are hotels in almost all towns, including several 5-star hotels in the major cities. However, not all hotels will accept foreigners.

Sanitary conditions are basic in rural areas.

Roads & Biking

City roads are generally good, but in rural areas watch out for very poor conditions. Reckless drivers are everywhere. Snow

closes high passes in winter; roads are often blocked by mudslides and heavy flooding during Pakistan's monsoon season.

Contact Information

- Visa requirements and travel advice: www.travel.state.gov/travel/
- General information on Pakistan: www.tourism.gov.pk/
- Ramadan: www.when-is.com/ramadan.asp

Books & Maps

- Pakistan Nelles map, Nelles Verlag, ISBN 978-3865742537, \$11.95
- *The Silk Roads: Routes through Syria, Turkey, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and China* by Paul Wilson, Trailblazer Publications, ISBN 978-1905864324, \$24.95

Motorcycle & Gear

1999 BMW R 1150 GS Adventure and
2002 BMW F 650 GS

Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega

Jacket and Pants: BMW Trailguard

Helmets: BMW System 5

Boots: MX boots, Alpinestars
Tech 6 and
Gaerne SG10