

NORTHERN PAKISTAN

The Himalaya, Karakoram & Hindu Kush

18 days

Created on: 22 Oct, 2024

Day 1 Arrival in Islamabad

Today we assemble in Islamabad - welcome to Pakistan!

About this Itinerary: This is our best hope for what we expect to accomplish on our trip, however a "go with the flow" attitude is necessary. While we and our local partners have tried our best to make this itinerary as accurate as possible, it should be considered an approximation of activities rather than a strict schedule. Though we try our best to adhere to the schedule, many unforeseen factors influence our tour -- weather conditions, health, route conditions, government restrictions, and other factors beyond our control. Alternative arrangements will be sought in such circumstances and the program will be modified accordingly.

Overnight in Islamabad.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Islamabad Sightseeing

After a leisurely morning (due to the possibility of late-night arrivals and the lingering effects of jetlag), we'll begin our exploration of Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. This modern, lush, green, and spacious city was established in the 1950s against the backdrop of the Margalla Hills at the northern edge of the Potohar Mountain Range.

We visit the Pakistan Monument at Shakar Padian Hill, continuing to Lok Virsa and the National Institute of Folk and Traditional Heritage. Next we visit the world's second largest mosque, the Shah Faisal, designed by the Turkish architect, Vedat Dalokay, and financed largely by donations from Saudi Arabia. We drive through the diplomatic enclave, past the Supreme Court of Pakistan, the Prime Minister's House, and Parliament house.

We can also visit a typical shopping mall, where you can, among other things, see/buy a typical Pakistani outfit, designed and created by famous local designers.

Overnight in Islamabad.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 3 Islamabad: Taxila & Rawalpindi

After breakfast we depart the city by road and travel approximately one hour to Taxila, one of the sub-continent's most important archaeological treasures, with the remains of three great cities and dozens of Buddhist monasteries dating from 600 BCE to AD 600. It is strategically located at the meeting place of trade routes linking China, India, Central Asia, and the West. Taxila survived through many empires and became the cultural crossroad of the ancient world.

Buddhism took hold in the region around 275 BCE and from here the religion spread to Central Asia, Tibet, and China. We visit Taxila Museum, famous for its finest examples of Gandharan sculptures and art. It also houses some of the important artifacts and discoveries of ancient civilizations. We visit one of the important Buddhist stupas at Dharmarajika. If weather and time permits, we'll visit the nearby ancient city of Sirkap.

We continue to Rawalpindi for a break for lunch followed by a visit of the historic city and old bazaar.

Return to Islamabad.

Overnight in Islamabad.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 4 Islamabad - Naran

After an early breakfast we depart Islamabad for Naran (6-7 hour drive) north of Islamabad. The first 3 hours take us through the district of Hazara in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. The road runs through the green and well-forested western Himalayan spurs of the Hazara district. En route we pass through Abbottabad, Mansehra, Balakot, and Kaghan.

The area has rich history with the earliest written accounts dating back to Alexander's conquest of the region in the 4th Century BCE, followed by Buddhist rule in the 3rd century BCE, which left behind some interesting archaeological sites such as Asoka's Rock Edicts at Manshera, dating back to around the 3rd Century AD.

Overnight in Naran (2400m/7,875 ft)

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 5 Naran - Hunza via Babusar Pass

Today's journey continues via the N15 highway toward Babusar Pass, which connects province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with Gilgit Baltistan.

Before the construction of the Karakoram Highway (KKH), Babusar Pass, at 4173m (13,690 feet), some 70km from Naran, was the main route for crossing into Pakistan's Northern Areas (Gilgit Baltistan). The road, diminishing to just a jeep track at its completion in 1898, is now a well-made road, which follows the Kunar River, passing through small towns such as Battakundi, Burawai, and Besal. Beyond Burawai the road rises further and the scenery starts to change, with silver fir and blue pine trees becoming scantier and the hills barer.

Continuing north from Besal, the road runs along the 2.5km long Lulusar Lake with its deep green waters and reaches Gittidas, the last village before the pass. The valley broadens out here, and further on steadily climbs for around seven kilometres to the summit of Babusar Pass (the highest point on our journey), continuing down the other side to Chilas on the Karakoram Highway. We will be rewarded by the spectacular panorama that greets us on our final descent.

From Babusar Pass the road passes through Thak Valley to Chilas. There are many rock carvings at Chilas, the majority of which date back to the Buddhist pilgrims who frequented these routes while travelling between China and the great Buddhist sites of south Asia.

After a break at the Shangrila Hotel in Chilas, we continue up the KKH to Gilgit (257km). The road winds round the foot of Nanga Parbat (8125m/26,660 ft), the world's ninth highest mountain, located at the western tip of the Himalayan Range. Before Gilgit we stop at the meeting of three of the world's greatest mountain ranges: the Himalaya, Karakoram, and Hindu Kush.

We continue to witness splendid scenery as we near Hunza -- weather-permitting we hope to see spectacular Rakaposhi Peak with its snowy crown. The route is abundant with terraced fields flanked by trees, particularly pretty in spring with apricot, apple, and peach blossom. In autumn the very same trees set themselves ablaze with fiery shades of yellow, orange, and red.

This afternoon we arrive in Karimabad village, the largest and main centre of Hunza, set on a mountainside with water channels defining the tiered levels of the villagers' fields and houses. Looming above the village of Karimabad, are several noteworthy peaks, including Ultar Peak (7388m/22,440 ft) and its glacier as a curtain backdrop, a majestic view of Mt. Rakaposhi (7788m/25,550 ft) and Diran Peak (7257m/23,810 ft). These views of the surrounding snow-capped mountains are spectacular.

Upon arrival in Karimabad Hunza, we continue to Altit in the small neighbouring valley to Karimabad. After hotel check-in and a chance to freshen up, we may have a chance to visit historic Altit Fort. This historic small fort is perched on a rocky outcrop high above the Hunza River, the only river that cuts through the width of the mighty Karakoram. The fort's balcony overlooks a village of mud houses with flat rooftops used as extra work areas for drying fruit etc. Prince (King) Charles and Camilla visited Altit Fort along with Prince Karim Aga Khan when it was still being restored in October of 2006. We will visit this fort tomorrow if we do not have enough time on this day.

Overnight in Hunza (Altit or Aliabad, approx 2500m/8,200 ft).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

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Day 6 Hunza: Baltit Fort & Village Excursion

After a relaxed breakfast we head out to visit Baltit Fort. Hunza was a princely state ruled by one family, the Ayashkutz, for over 900 years. The ruler of Hunza was called the Mir of Hunza by outsiders and Thum by locals. The people of Hunza are called the Hunzokutz. The rule of the Ayashkutz family came to an end when, in 1974, the then Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, abolished all the princely states in Pakistan.

Baltit Fort was occupied by some of the elderly members of the Ayashkutz family until 1960; Mir himself had already shifted to a new palace much earlier. In 1996 Baltit Fort was reopened after a meticulous restoration by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. It has been transformed into a heritage museum, and has been given several international awards. Later we visit the local bazaar before continuing back to our hotel.

Overnight in Hunza (Altit or Aliabad).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 7 Hunza - Hoppar Valley - Duiker

Today we leave the Hunza Valley and cross the river to the Nagar Valley. This region holds some of the region's larger glaciers, the starting point for some of the more popular trekking routes. The valley lies along the southwest boundary of the Bualtar Glacier and offers a unique characteristic, transformed and created by glaciers. We walk through Hoppar village and enjoy lunch among the glaciers with fine views all around.

We return to Karimabad and continue to Duiker, the highest settlement in the area (2850m/9,350 ft), and the highest overnight point on our tour. Before sunset, we walk to a close-by point to enjoy magnificent 360° view of the snow-covered peaks and the valley below.

Overnight in Duiker.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 8 Duiker - Attabad Lake - Janapad Passu Duikar - Attabad Lake - Passu

Today we will depart for Passu, another couple of hours drive to the north. We will see Attabad Lake, formed in 2010 due to a landslide that blocked the Karakorum Highway and the Hunza River. As of 2015 there is road access again while the river continues to flow southward after a team of Pakistani and Chinese engineers completed the necessary tunnels. We stop at various points for views of the pristine blue waters and we will get an opportunity to take a traditional boat excursion out on the lake (or on our return, depending on the timing and the weather).

Time permitting, we will also have an excursion to see the mountain scenery at and around Borith Lake, a resting point for several species of birds during their migrations.

We continue on toward Janapad Passu and our overnight accommodations (2600m/8,530 ft)

Overnight in Janapad Passu.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 9 Passu & Khunjerab Pass

After breakfast we drive to Sost, the last border town on the KKH, and continue to Khunjerab National Park. The park has an area of 2270 sq km and it is one of the highest altitude national parks in the world. It was established in 1979 by Z.A. Bhutto and consists of three different valleys: Khunjerab, through which the KKH passes; Ghujerab, and the remote Shimshal Valley. At the end of valley, there is 4700m/14,420 ft Khunjerab Pass, the world's highest paved road crossing the international border to China.

Today's drive takes us through high, wild, and magnificent scenery. The region is home to Markhor (Marco Polo) sheep, Himalayan ibex, blue

sheep, snow leopards, and Tibetan wolves. We are also close to the Wakhan Corridor, a snaky bit of Afghanistan created at the turn of the last century by the British and Russians to keep both empires apart.

We return to our accommodations in Passu after our excursion to Khunjerab. Weather permitting, we hope to also see the peaks known as the Passu Cones at some point during our visit.

□
Overnight in Passu.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 10 Passu - Gilgit & Kargah

After a relaxed breakfast we'll continue our journey with a scenic drive (3-4 hours) back to Gilgit. This afternoon we visit nearby Kargah, known for its large standing Buddha carved high on a cliff face. We visit the bazaar before retiring to our hotel.

□
Overnight in Gilgit (1500m/4,920 ft).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 11 Gilgit - Kachura - Shigar

After breakfast we drive to Kachura-Skardu, capital of Baltistan. In no other part of the world is there such a large number of high mountains in such a confined space as in Baltistan. The ideal route is from the west, which follows the Indus River for 106km/350 mi from the KKH to the capital town of Skardu. Previously this was a route plagued with rockfalls and slow-moving traffic on a narrow rough track. Recently, however (from 2018 - ongoing), this road has been expanded and paved by the Pakistan Army Engineers.

Soon after leaving the KKH and crossing Gilgit River at Maqun Das, we will see the magnificent Nanga Parbat's west face, 9th highest peak in the world (8125m/26,660 ft) and the 2nd highest mountain of Pakistan.

After a lunch stop in Kachura we continue through the town of Skardu to Shigar, the last part of which passes through a "cold desert" region, a unique landscape with large sandy dunes flank the river when it is not in flood with melting snows. The broad fertile Shigar Valley is ringed by mountains, several snow-capped year round. The town of Shigar is the gateway to the great Karakoram mountains and "Eight-thousanders," 14 mountains that are more than 8000 meters, including K2, the second highest mountain in the world.

We overnight at Shigar Fort, which has won many international tourism and historic awards for its quality restoration by the Aga Khan Trust. We will likely have a local site guide take us around on a tour of Shigar Fort shortly after our arrival.

Overnight in Shigar (2230m/7316 ft).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 12 Shigar Sightseeing

Our day will unfold based on factors such as the weather. We will have a walk through the relaxed town of Shigar where you may have the opportunity to interact with the people living in this lush natural environment. The locals produce apples, apricots, pears, cherries, and walnuts. Our exploration of the town will also include the delicately-constructed wooden mosque of Amburiq, built in the 14th-century by Kashmiri craftsmen and restored by a conservation group in an effort to preserve the Tibetan and Kashmiri architecture of the original structure.

Today we will also embark on a 4WD excursion to take in the expansive valley and mountain views nearby.

Overnight at Shigar Fort.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 13 Shigar - Fly to Islamabad

After breakfast we transfer to the airport at Skardu for our flight to Islamabad. It is 1 hour flight known for spectacular mountain views.*

Upon arrival we transfer to our hotel for check-in. Later we will visit the nearby Pakistan National Council of Art Museum.

* In the event of flight cancellation (ie due to weather), we will travel back to Islamabad by road today and tomorrow.

Overnight in Islamabad.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 14 Islamabad & Excursion to Peshawar

Today we have an excursion to Peshawar.*

Khyber Pakhtoon Khwa Province, formerly known as North West Frontier Province, is Pakistan's most diverse, covering an area of over 100,000 square kilometers including the Tribal Areas. KPK stretched from Pamir in the extreme north all the way south as far as Dera Ismail Khan on the banks of the Indus River, encompassing high mountains, fertile river basins, and semi-arid deserts. At the heart of the province is the Peshawar Valley. Its rich alluvial soils, watered by the Kabul and Swat rivers, make this amongst the most productive agricultural regions in Pakistan.

The drive to Peshawar is a unique experience. For centuries, traders and invaders made their way to/from India, making and losing fortunes. You can still see traces of those times, in terms of fortresses and caravanserais (inns).

The romance of Peshawar has traditionally been linked to its frontier location close to the historic Khyber Pass (due to security reasons, it is closed to visitors since 9/11). Today Peshawar is a large rapidly-developing and growing city, but with a distinct character all of its own. Indeed much of its unique atmosphere still thrives in the fascinating bazaars of the old city. In the traditional Central Asian style, the Old City was formerly completely encircled by a wall and centered on a citadel.

In the late afternoon we return to Islamabad.

* The above described Peshwar excursion will occur only if our previous day's flight is not cancelled due to weather. In the event of cancellation, this day will be a continuation of our road journey back to Islamabad.

Overnight in Islamabad.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 15 Islamabad - Hindu Temple at Katas - Lahore

Today we travel by road to Lahore via Katas.

In the village of Katas there are extensive Satghara Hindu temples, centered around a large pool and spring. According to legend the pool was formed of tears from Shiva's eye as he wept over the death of his wife Parvati. Tears from his second eye fell near Amjer in Rajasthan forming a second pool. The oldest temple on the hill overlooking the complex has a narrow staircase inside which leads up onto the top of the roof overlooking the site and a very good view of the surrounding hills. We then continue to Lahore.

PLEASE NOTE: This evening we may/will likely be meeting travellers arriving today to join our Southern Pakistan tour. For the short time in Lahore, our total group size owing to this overlap may exceed our usual maximum; however, this will be deftly managed with multiple vehicles and guides, such that we won't feel "crowded" for our sightseeing and at meal times over the next two days.

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Overnight in Lahore.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 16 Lahore: Royal Bath, Lahore Fort & Badshahi Mosque

Today we explore Lahore.

We visit the Shahi Hammam and Walled City of Lahore, containing many buildings, bazaars, public spaces, and monuments of high cultural, architectural, and historic value. The Shahi Hammam is located inside Delhi Gate and provides an ideal context for welcoming visitors to the Walled City. In 2012, the Walled City Authority created an enabling environment for the restoration of the Shahi Hammam by removing commercial encroachments around the historic building.

Next is the Wazir Khan Mosque, located further inside the Walled City. The mosque was built in 1643 and is renowned for its use and execution of inlaid pottery decoration in the wall paneling. The Badshahi Mosque was built for the Emperor Aurangzeb in 1673-74 and is Lahore's most striking building.

Modelled on the great Jami Masjid in Delhi, it has an impressive 20 meters high gateway and a central prayer chamber topped by three large white marble domes that open onto an enormous courtyard. It has space for 100,000 worshippers at a single time.

We also visit Lahore Fort, built by the Mughals during their days of rule. The fort contains some of the most impressive secular Mughal buildings in South Asia. Embellished with carved red sandstones, marble, pietra dura work, glazed colored and Kashi tile works plus frescos depicting princely pleasures. It is more a "place" than just a fort.

Overnight in Lahore.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Lahore: Lahore Museum, Shalimar Garden & Wagah Border

After breakfast we visit Lahore Museum, Shalimar Garden, and the flag lowering ceremony at Wagah Border.

Lahore Museum is the oldest and best in Pakistan. The museum's first curator was John Lockwood Kipling, father of Rudyard Kipling who referred to the museum as the "Ajaib Ghar" or House of Wonders. The coin collection here is extremely valuable with some from the period of Alexander the Great.

Standing outside the museum is the famous Zam Zama Gun. Immortalized by Kipling in the opening lines of "Kim" this mighty cannon is so named because on firing it resembles a lion's roar. The gun saw action in the Battle of Punjab 1761 and was badly damaged in the battle of Multan in 1818. It was subsequently retired to Lahore Fort, and finally moved to its present location in 1870.

We then visit the Shalimar Gardens, dating from the period when the Mughal Empire was at its artistic and aesthetic zenith. Laid out as a Persian paradise, it was intended to create a representation of an earthly utopia in which humans co-exist in perfect harmony with all elements of nature. In 1981 the Shalimar Gardens were inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site as they embody Mughal garden design at the apogee of its development.

Finally we then witness the Flag Lowering Ceremony at Wagah Border, an interesting daily 'Beating Retreat' ceremony at Wagah border since 1959. Indian and Pakistani security forces jointly drill a very seriously provocative parade, imbued with humour and drama. The ceremony starts with a blustering parade by the soldiers from both sides and ends up with the perfectly coordinated lowering of two nations' flags. Flags are folded and the ceremony ends with a retreat that involves abrupt handshakes between the soldiers of each side followed by the closing of the gates.

Overnight in Lahore.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Departure

Departure from Lahore.

BON VOYAGE!