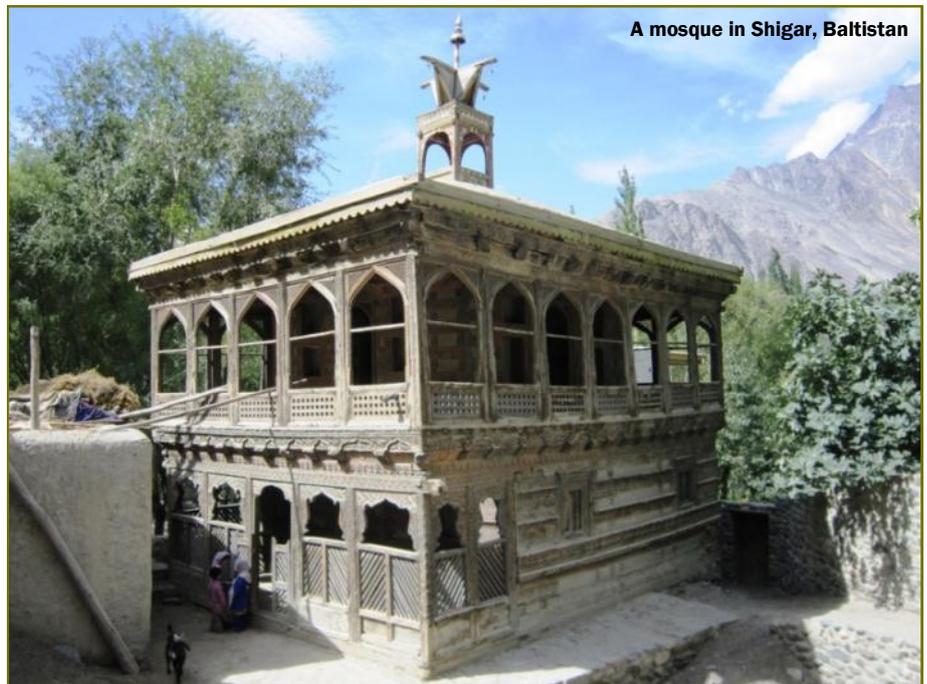


I discussed politics, religion, and the state of the world

When I was a student, more years ago than I care to admit, I travelled through Pakistan, visiting Quetta, Lahore, Rawalpindi, Taxila and Peshawar. But the highlight, both literally and metaphorically, was the Kaghan Valley. A chemistry professor from Karachi and his family offered me a seat in their jeep on what was then the rough track up to Naran. As a penniless student, I was allowed to sleep on the floor of the dining room of the government rest house. The cook fed me delicious, freshly caught trout. I walked up, over patches of snow, to the magnificent Saiful Mulk Lake. I discussed politics, religion and the state of the world with the chemistry professor. I was overwhelmed by the warmth, friendship and generosity of everyone I met. But the journey that year was unfulfilled. I wanted to travel on up over the Babusar Pass to Gilgit and Skardu, but it was still early in the season; the pass was not yet open; and I had to begin the long overland journey back to England to resume my studies. I vowed though to return.



A mosque in Shigar, Baltistan

I eventually made my way to Gilgit-Baltistan two years ago, but from the opposite direction. We came south from the snow covered wilderness of southern Xinjiang, over the Khunjerab Pass. The initial views on the Pakistani side were just as stark and austere as those in China – snow, ice, rock, boulder strewn torrents of milky snow melt water and Chinese engineers working on the KKH (Karakoram Highway), blasting away at the mountain side. Apart from the road menders, the only signs of life were three ibex and a solitary eagle. Slowly, imperceptibly, the countryside softened as we descended the Hunza Valley. The grey, white and blue of the rock, snow and sky remained above us, but the valley floor became green. By Gulmit, there were poplars, apple, apricot and mulberry trees. Wheat, barley, potatoes and maize were growing on fertile terraces. We stayed in Gulmit, visiting the charming cultural museum and old wooden mosques, scrambling up to the fort, wandering through neighbouring villages and up

to the glacier. We moved on, past the petroglyphs on the Hunza Sacred Rocks to Karimabad, and then Gilgit. Finally, we stayed in a cabin at Fairy Meadow, with its stupendous views of Nanga Parbat in front and Rakaposhi behind. Magnificent though the scenery was, the most striking memory of Hunza was the friendliness of everyone we met. We chatted with shop keepers and school children. A young



Milking in Yaltsa Lungma

woman in a lane told us how she was going off to Lahore to study for an MBA. A man carrying a basket of apricots told us about his time in the army. Another man, whom we had met on the road the previous day, invited us into his house and gave us

I discussed politics, religion, and the state of the world - cont'd



tea and biscuits. He showed us photographs of his grandfather who had been the Mir's ambassador to Kashgar. Everyone asked us about our family, where we came from and where we were going. It is tempting to make comparisons between the peaceful Hunza

Valley and the mythical Shangri-La of James Hilton's Lost Horizon, but Hunza wins on every count. We planned to return last year, but reluctantly cancelled our trip when we were told that the floods, which had cut the KKH, had caused food and fuel shortages. We returned though this year. When our PIA flight was cancelled due to bad weather, I fulfilled my ambition of driving over the Babusar Pass and on along the narrow, winding, vertiginous Indus Gorge to Skardu. The two day road journey was tiring, but the comfort of the Shigar Fort Residence more than compensated for that. Managed by Serena Hotels, the Raja's exquisite wood and stone palace has been converted into a very comfortable and stylish hotel. Bedrooms in the old fort have ancient wood carvings and modern bathrooms. The service was superb. We ate breakfast on a terrace overlooking the river, beneath a can-

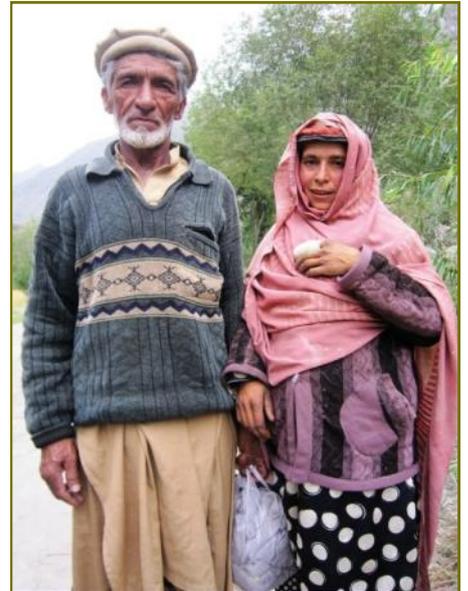
opy of vines, facing a garden with yellow dahlias and trees bearing plums and peaches, walnuts and almonds. We ate tasty suppers in a restaurant converted from the stables which used to house the Raja's polo horses. We visited the museum in the fort and enjoyed a guided tour of the village, taking in the wooden mosques, the small bazaars and walking up to the site of a Buddhist monastery where all that remains are petroglyphs and panoramic views up the valley.

We drove on up the lush and beautiful Shigar Valley and then followed the more desolate Bradu Valley to

Askole – the village which is the starting point for treks up the Baltoro Glacier towards K2.

We also trekked for four days over the 4,500 metre Thalle La pass, starting among the buckwheat, beans and barley of the fertile lower Thalle Valley and walking on up to the treeless summer pastures where yak and dzos

graze. Even in those high, inhospitable lands, among rocky cliffs, glaciers, snowy peaks and hail storms, the yak herders were welcoming and friendly. One yak herder called us back to watch him



milking a dzo. Others invited us into their stone huts to watch them heating sheep's milk over a dung fire and churning it into cheese, before offering us yak butter tea.

They say that Gilgit-Baltistan is one of the best kept tourist secrets in the world. That may have something to do with the difficulties in getting there. The flights from Islamabad are unreliable and the condition of the KKH is now appalling, but, as we have discovered, it is well worth making the effort. We will be back.

Nic Madge

Former District Judge, HHJ Nic Madge is a writer and photographer. This article first appeared in the Pamir Times. Visit Nic's personal website www.nicmadge.co.uk

