

A short walk in the Karakoram



ish doctor; Jenia, a Russian travel agent; and Fiona, a social worker from Hong Kong. Besides Akbar, our guide, we had twelve porters, a cook, an assistant cook, five horses, a goat and three chickens. Predictably, the goat and the chickens did not return. They perished en route. Their final destination was always the cooking pot.

We walked for up to fourteen hours a day. We crossed raging torrents on rickety bridges. We forded streams. We traversed crevasses. We climbed and de-

scape punctuated with ice bergs. Sometimes, pure white ice, but mostly the surface of the main glacier is covered with grey debris of boulders, rocks, stones and gravel. A day before K2 Base Camp, we reached Concordia, a vast undulating area of snow, ice and rock where no fewer than five glaciers meet. It is surrounded by high mountains; triangular K2 at 8,611 metres above sea level; Broad Peak at 8,051 metres above sea level; the Gasherbrums, with Gasherbrum I at 8,080 metres above sea level; Masherbrum at 7,821 metres above sea level; and the pure white Chogolisa at 7,665 metres above sea level. We asked about other peaks. Akbar dismissed them. "Oh, that peak is not important." Against that back drop, we felt very, very small. All four of us agreed that this was the most beautiful high mountain scenery we had seen anywhere in the world; better than any place in the Himalayas, Andes, Urals, Alps or Pyrenees.

The Base Camp for K2, the second highest mountain in the world, has to be one of the most remote tourist destinations in the world. It is in the heart of the Karakoram Mountains, in northern Pakistan, close to the Chinese border. If, as frequently happens, the flights from Islamabad to Skardu are cancelled due to poor weather, there is a long two day car journey over poor roads to Skardu, followed by a day in a jeep over a rough track to the trail head at Ashkole. It is only then that the seven day trek at high altitude up the Baltoro Glacier can begin. Remember though Betty Wright's song *No Pain, No Gain*. She may sing about love, but her words apply equally to the trek up to K2 Base Camp. It may be a tough trek, but the rewards are amazing.

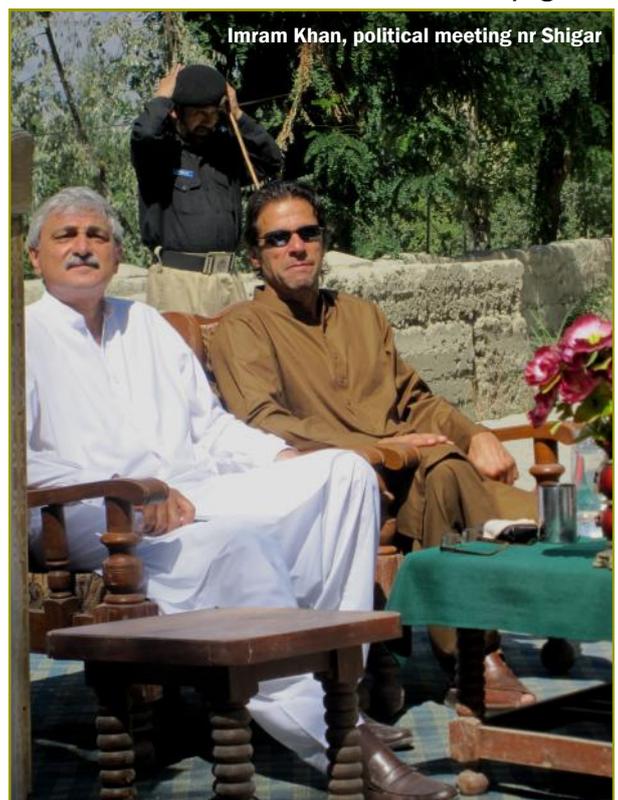
So, in early September, I set out on this epic expedition with three people I had not met before; Quique, a Span-

scended ice cliffs. We braved a snow storm. Our porters pitched our tents on the glacier itself.

From the ever present sound of running water in the lower valley, we moved on to the silence of the high glacier, punctuated only by the sound of rock falls during the day and avalanches at night.

The Baltoro Glacier is one of the longest in the northern hemisphere. It has its own topography. Hills and valleys. Streams and lakes. High ice cliffs and deep crevasses. Strangely shaped seracs. Semi-circular ice caves, looking liked the back drop of concert halls. Flat topped mushroom rocks with stems of ice. Sometimes, a moon-

Continued on page 18



Imram Khan, political meeting nr Shigar

A short walk in the Karakoram - cont'd



Polo match, Skardu

the next town and negotiated an armed police escort. In fact a combination of police, army and Anti-Terrorist Squad escorted us in convoy with the Japanese and three French climbers in a jeep, for much of the way back to Islamabad. At its lightest, the escort comprised two policemen on a 100cc motor bike with one gun. At its strongest, it included Anti-Terrorist Squad officers wearing helmets and flak jackets in pick up trucks with mounted machine guns. It was only when Quique and I reached Dubai Airport that we read in newspapers about the violent demonstrations against the anti-Islamic film *The Innocence of Muslims* and the attempt to storm the diplomatic quarter of Islamabad.

Nic Madge

It is perhaps wrong to describe K2 Base Camp as a tourist destination. There are no buildings. There is no camp site. There is certainly no piped water or sanitation. There are simply a few mounds of rock on the surface of the glacier where climbers have in the past pitched their tents. When we arrived it was deserted. We walked back down the Baltoro for four days, assuming that the hardest part was over. We were wrong. Trekking to K2 Base Camp was easy when compared with the journey from Skardu back to Islamabad. We assumed that after our first shower in a fortnight, we would simply board the plane. However, four days of bad weather meant that planes had been cancelled. Akbar was unable to get our tickets confirmed and so we travelled overland in a twenty year old Toyota Corolla. Four hours out of Skardu, in the narrow Indus Gorge, there had been land slides. Two kilometres of road had been obliterated by tons of earth, mud and rock. We waited for ten hours while two giant yellow Kawa-

saki excavators cleared the obstruction. We resumed in the dark, but, shortly after midnight, still two hours short of our overnight hotel, we were stopped at a police check point. The road was closed overnight. It was too dangerous to proceed. We had to sleep in the car. Our driver started again soon after 4 a.m., but three hours later, and still about 400 kms from Islamabad, we were stopped again at police check point. There was a strike in the next town and it was too dangerous to go any further. The guide to a group of Japanese tourists went on with our driver to



Blind man chanting, Skardu