Karakoram Highway

A thin ribbon of asphalt strikes north from near Islamabad and leaves the modern capital and the dusty Punjab plains far behind. As it weaves through sparse green hills, the first wrinkles of mountain-building in this geological ‘collision zone’, this unassuming road gives little hint as to what lies ahead. This is the high road to China, the Karakoram Highway (KKH), which was blasted and bulldozed through an intractable landscape of raging rivers, deep ravines and precipitous peaks in the 1960s and ‘70s. It is a 1200km marvel of engineering and a symbolic collaboration between Pakistan and China. It is also a magnet for adventure-seekers.

The KKH unites the plains of Pakistan with erstwhile independent mountain kingdoms and connects South Asia with West and Central Asia. It follows a branch of that ancient network of trade routes known as the Silk Road, and one of its tricks is time travel. The KKH takes you to where Buddhism spread to China and Tibet, to the colourful bazaar of Kashgar that remains more than just a memory of a Silk Road oasis, and to the intrigues of the 19th-century Great Game. It has also brought the 21st century to the fabled valley of Hunza, and fume-belching trucks and minibuses have now mostly displaced donkeys and camels as the caravans of trade.

As it traverses northern Pakistan and enters western China, via the 4730m Khunjerab Pass, the KKH navigates the highest concentration of soaring peaks and long glaciers in the world. Intrepid travellers are delivered to some of the most awe-inspiring and challenging trekking they are ever likely to encounter. And for some, this is where the real adventure starts.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Unwinding in Karimabad (p299), the heart of the fabled valley of Hunza and home to the 700-year-old mountain-top Baltit Fort (p300)
- Testing your courage and sense of balance on the Two Bridges walk near the peaceful village of Passu (p311)
- Marvelling at the mallet-wielding mayhem and horsemanship at a polo tournament in Gilgit (p275)
- Bartering in the colourful bazaars of Kashgar (p324), former Silk Road oasis and legendary market town
- Exploring the trails of Baltistan (p284) and beyond, where the Karakoram ruptures from the earth’s crust in an unequalled display of high peaks and twisting glaciers
- Crossing the Khunjerab Pass (p317), a geographical and cultural watershed, in a modern replay of an ancient passage between empires past
History
Spanning some of the most rugged and remote mountains in the world, the KKH region is held together by several historical currents. These are the Silk Road and the spread of Buddhism; the arrival of Islam; imperial struggles, particularly the ‘Great Game’ between Britain and Russia; and, of course, the Highway itself.

THE SILK ROAD & THE FLOWERING OF BUDDHISM
Buddhism spread throughout the northern subcontinent under the charismatic (and last) Mauryan king, Ashoka (272–232 BC), whose excesses in war led to his conversion and active patronage of the new philosophy. Soon after Ashoka’s death, however, the region descended into chaos with several invasions from Central Asia and a recurring Hindu backlash. Meanwhile, the Han dynasty in China was pushing its frontiers west and south over a growing network of trade routes that later came to be called the Silk Road.

From the early Han capital of Chang’an (now Xian), a line of oases skirted north and south around the Taklamakan Desert to Kashgar. From there, tracks ran west across the Pamir and Turkestan (Central Asia) to Persia (Iran), Iraq and the Mediterranean, and south across the Karakoram to Kashmir. Caravans went west with porcelain, silk, tea, spices and seeds of peach and orange, and brought back wool, gold, ivory, jewels and European delicacies such as figs and walnuts – as well as new ideas.

Bandits from Mongolia, Tibet and the little Karakoram state of Hunza made these expeditions dangerous, and Han emperors spent vast resources policing the road. Among the tribes driven south by the Han were the Yüeh-chih (or Kushans) who, by the 1st century AD, controlled an empire spanning Kashgar, most of the Karakoram, the Hindukush and northern India. Under the Kushan dynasty, centred in Gandhara, Buddhism experienced an artistic and intellectual flowering and spread up the Indus into Central Asia, China and Tibet. The Silk Road became as much a cultural artery as a commercial one.

Buddhism left an extraordinary record in western China and northern Pakistan that can be seen while travelling along the KKH: the cave frescoes of San Xian outside Kashgar; the petroglyphs at Shatial, Chilas and Ganish; and the bas-relief Buddhas near Gilgit and Skardu.

THE ADVENT OF ISLAM & THE DECLINE OF THE SILK ROAD
Although an Arab expedition reached Kashgar in the 8th century, the earliest conversions to Islam in the Tarim Basin were by rulers of the Qarakhan dynasty in the 12th century. Today most non-Chinese there are Sunni Muslims. Almost simultaneously with the 8th-century Central Asia explorations, an Arab naval force arrived at the mouth of the Indus, but likewise left little religious imprint. It wasn’t until the 11th century that Islam began to establish itself in this region. Muslim Turkic raiders from Afghanistan, led by the warlord Mahmud of Ghazni, battered the Indus Valley in the early 11th century. Conversion to Islam was widespread, for pragmatic as much as spiritual reasons.

In the early 13th century the Mongol armies of Genghis Khan had subdued Central Asia and had began raiding south into the

TRAVELLING SAFELY ON (& OFF) THE KARAKORAM HIGHWAY (KKH)

The towns and villages along the KKH, particularly in the Northern Areas (NA), are among the safest and most hospitable in Pakistan. Whether you enter from China or Punjab, you will keenly feel the relaxed and outgoing nature of the people here. Nevertheless, there are a few issues of which to be aware.

Avoid any travel at night, particularly in northern Hazara and Indus Kohistan; buses have occasionally been robbed at night on the KKH from Thakot as far south as Mansehra.

Indus Kohistan, away from the KKH, is fairly lawless and communities can be very suspicious of outsiders. On top of having a reputation for anarchy, many local men have skewed ideas about foreign women. Do not to go into the hills alone, and check with the local chief of police or district officer of the Frontier Constabulary before exploring beyond the Highway, especially between Shatial and Pattan.
subcontinent. With the largest contiguous land empire in history, cleared of bandits and boundaries by the Mongols, the Silk Road enjoyed a last burst of activity into the 14th century. Europeans, now forced to take note of Asian power, also took an interest in Asia; Marco Polo made (or made up) his epic journeys during this time. The subsequent eclipse of the Silk Road has been variously attributed to the arrival of Islam, the collapse of the Mongols, and the drying up of oasis streams.

The final nail in the Silk Road’s coffin was the discovery in 1497 of a sea route from Europe around Africa to India by the Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama. By this time the entire region now spanned by the KKH was Muslim, but it was in total disarray, fractured by quarrelling remnants of the Mongol empire in the north, petty chieftains in the mountains, successors of the 14th-century invader from Central Asia, Tamerlane (Timur), and Pashtun tribes in the south.

THE BRITISH, PARTITION & THE NORTHERN AREAS

In 1846 the British annexed the Sikh territories of Kashmir, Ladakh, Baltistan and the Gilgit-Hunza basin. Packaging them up as the State of Jammu & Kashmir, they sold them to the Hindu prince Gulab Singh and declared him the first Maharaja of Kashmir. Then Britain discovered Russia snooping in the Pamir and Afghanistan. In 1877 a British political agent arrived to look over the Kashmiri governor’s shoulder. The arrangement proved awkward and the British Agency was closed after a few years – only to reopen in 1889 as Britain’s anxiety mounted over Russia’s presence in the region. The new political agent was Captain Algernon Durand, who believed that to counter foreign influence in India all its frontier tribes would eventually have to be subjugated or bought off. He carried on his own foreign policy in the area, invading Hunza in 1891 and trying unsuccessfully to subdue Chilas in 1892–93. In 1935 Britain leased back the entire Agency from Kashmir and raised a local militia, the Gilgit Scouts.

At Partition in 1947 Maharaja Hari Singh, hoping for his own independence, stalled for two months before finally acceding to India. Gilgit and the surrounding valleys rose in revolt (see the boxed text, p275) and demanded to join Pakistan. India and Pakistan then went to war over Kashmir.

In the UN ceasefire that followed, Pakistan got temporary control over what is now the Northern Areas (NA), plus a slice of western Kashmir. The resulting closure of the Burzil Pass left only the Babusar Pass linking the NA to the rest of Pakistan until around 40 years ago, when construction began on the KKH and Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) began flights. The two countries went to war again in 1965 and 1971, and periodically skirmish over Siachen Glacier in eastern Baltistan.

Pakistan’s official position is that until a vote by the people of Kashmir (as specified in the 1947 ceasefire terms) is held, Kashmir doesn’t belong to anyone. This leaves the NA in limbo, because making it a province would concede the status quo of a divided Kashmir.

In 1969 the residual autonomy of former ministates like Hunza and Nagyr was abol-

ISLAM ALONG THE KARAKORAM HIGHWAY

Today people as far north on the KKH as Chilas are all Sunni Muslims, and more fervently so than their Kashgar counterparts. Alternative doctrines appear to have come to the northern mountains much later. In the 16th century, Taj Mughal, ruler of Badakhsran in northeast Afghanistan, seized Chitril and Gilgit, and is credited with bringing Ismailism to the region. From Kashmir, Shiite Islam moved into Baltistan at perhaps the end of the 16th century, and from there into Bagrot, Haramosh and Hunza-Nagyr in the 17th century. Hunza and Gojal, Shiite at first, adopted Ismailism in the 19th century. Even today a few old carved Shiite mosques can be seen there, in sharp contrast to the spanning green-and-white jamaat khanas (Ismaili community halls).

A separate Shiite branch, called Nurbakhshi, persists in Baltistan’s upper valleys, with its own doctrinal variations. While generally conservative, they are noticeable (eg in Khashpu) because, like the Ismailis, the women are not veiled in public.
ished. Now they’re all governed by the 24-member Northern Areas Council, headed by a federally appointed chief executive. The government is generous with development money and levies no direct taxes, but Northerners cannot, for example, vote in national elections. Having fought to join Pakistan, many now feel excluded.

Nevertheless, the region has acquired many of the political features of a province. Northern Areas Council members are all locally elected and can now campaign on the basis of political party affiliation. They in turn elect the deputy chief executive, with the rank of a minister of state in Pakistan. On his/her advice, the chief executive appoints four advisers with the rank of provincial ministers.

**THE KARAKORAM HIGHWAY**

Following its invasion of Tibet in 1950, China occupied parts of Ladakh, Baltistan and the upper Shimshal Valley in the mid-1950s. All traffic across the border stopped. While the Chinese border with Indian-held Kashmir is still in dispute today, a thaw in China–Pakistan relations in 1964 led to a border agreement, China’s return of 2000 sq km of territory, and talk of linking the two countries by road.

In 1966 the two countries embarked on one of the biggest engineering projects since the Pyramids: a two-lane, 1200km road across some of the highest mountains in the world, the Pamir and the Karakoram, from Kashgar in China to Havelian in Pakistan. Much of the KKH would traverse terrain that until then had barely allowed a donkey track. It was to be 20 years before it was fully open.

Pakistan had already started a road of its own in 1960, the 400km Indus Valley Rd between Swat and Gilgit. This and a road north from Havelian were completed in 1968 and linked by a bridge at Thakot. Between then and 1973, Pakistani crews worked north from the Indus, while the Chinese cut a road over the Khunjerab Pass to Gulmit, as well as north from the Khunjerab to Kashgar. All of the nearly 100 bridges encountered from the Khunjerab to Thakot were originally Chinese-built.

Chinese workers departed in early 1979, and later that year the KKH was declared complete in Pakistan. In August 1982 the Highway was formally inaugurated, the NA were opened to tourism as far as Passu, and the Khunjerab Pass was opened to official traffic and cross-border trade. On 1 May 1986 the Khunjerab Pass and the road to Kashgar were opened to tourism.

The workforce in Pakistan at any one time was about 15,000 Pakistani soldiers and between 9000 and 20,000 Chinese, working separately. Landslides, savage summer and winter conditions, and accidents claimed 400 to 500 lives on the Pakistani side of the border, roughly one for every 1.5km of roadway (though some claim the Chinese took away many more dead than they admitted). The highest toll was in Indus Kohistan.

Few statistics are available about work on the Chinese side. Crews there were a mixture of soldiers, convicts and paid volunteers with nothing but picks and shovels, hauling rocks and dirt on shoulder-poles.

Maintenance is a huge and endless job. The mountains continually try to reclaim the road, assisted by earthquakes, encroaching glaciers and the Karakoram’s typical crumbling slopes. Rockfalls and floods are routine, and travel is inherently unpredictable.

**People**

The KKH region’s invaders and traders have left behind a kaleidoscopic array of peoples that have evolved distinct languages, customs and gene pools in their largely isolated valleys. This variety is one of the things that makes KKH travel so absorbing. Nearly everybody is Muslim, but in an equally diverse patchwork of Sunni, Shiite, Ismaili and Nurbakhshi variants.

Pashto-speaking Pashtuns inhabit the KKH well down into Hazara, along with speakers of Hindko and other Punjabi dialects. Kohistanis are thought to be Shins, descendants of invaders from the lower Indus Valley at least 1000 years ago, who were converted to Islam by Pashtun crusaders from the 14th century onwards. Kohistani speech is a mixture of Shina, Pashto, Urdu and Persian.

Gilgit, the region’s historical trading hub, is a melting pot of peoples from all over Central and South Asia that sometimes boils over with ethnic and religious tensions. Its dominant language is Shina, also spoken around Nanga Parbat and down the Indus to Chilas and beyond. Up the catchments of the Gilgit and Ghizar Rivers is a mixture of Burusho, Shina speakers and Pashtuns. Some Chitralis are here too, speaking Khowar, an
THE GUJARS

Gujars (pronounced gu-jr), descended from the landless poor of lowland Pakistan and India, eke out an existence as nomadic herders. In May and June they drive their cows, yaks, sheep or goats into the high meadows of the lower NA (roughly as far north as Gilgit) and southern North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). They sell a few animals when they need to buy supplies and then descend in September and October. They are a common sight on and off the KKH at these times, moving beside the road in long files of animals and people, or camped outside towns. They winter on marginal land, often on the dry riverbeds, seldom associating with local people.

Though Sunni Muslims, they are considered low-caste by many, even in nominally caste-free Pakistan. They rarely marry non-Gujars. Gujar women do not observe purdah (the wearing of a veil), and on the KKH south of Gilgit they may be the only women whose faces you ever glimpse. Gujars near Gilgit speak Shina, while those closer to the Shandur Pass and in Chitral speak Khowar.

Indic language. In the other direction from Gilgit is Baltistan, whose mainly Tibetan people speak a classical form of Tibetan.

The people of Gojal are mainly Tajiks, originally from Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor and speaking Wakhi, a form of Persian. The Burusho of southern Gojal, the Hunza Valley and Upper Nagyr speak Burushaski, a language whose origins continue to mystify scholars. The people of Lower Nagyr have similar roots but speak mostly Shina, the language of Gilgit.

Uyghurs are predominant from the Khunjerab Pass to Kashgar, plus there are large rural populations of Tajiks, Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, each sharing ancestry, language and customs with communities in Central Asia, Iran and (in the case of Tajiks) Pakistan. In Kashgar you will see the occasional descendant of White Russians. And, of course, Han Chinese entrepreneurs and administrators are everywhere on the China side.

Climate

The most pleasant temperatures for KKH travel are in May, June, September and October. July and August get uncomfortably hot along most of the KKH, except in high-altitude trekking zones.

In northern Pakistan the wettest months are during the monsoon, from late July to early September, with random summer storms from Hunza southwards, and steady rain and high humidity from Indus Kohistan and the Kaghan Valley southwards. These monsoonal regions are also sporadically drizzly from December to March. The driest months are May and June and mid-September to November, with the clearest skies in autumn. Xinjiang remains extremely arid all year long, with a trace of rain in summer.

From Gilgit to Kashgar, winter is long and cold (often well below freezing), especially in January and February, and snow closes many high passes, including the Khunjerab.

National Parks

The KKH runs through the Khunjerab National Park and you will have to pay a US$4 fee (or the equivalent in rupees) for the privilege. For details on this park’s founding and conservation credentials, as well as background to other parks in the region, see p68.

Language

Travelling along the KKH is like passing through half a dozen tiny countries. In addition to the two national languages of Urdu and Mandarin Chinese, there are at least seven other common tongues, from three different linguistic families. Persian is also understood to some extent throughout the region.

Prominent local languages are Khowar or Chitrali (Ishkoman, Yasin and Ghizar), Pashto (Besham and northern Hazara), Kohistani (Indus Kohistan), Shina (spoken around Gilgit and in the Indus Valley from Chilas to Lower Nagyr), Burushaski (spoken in Yasin, Hunza and Upper Nagyr), Wakhi (Gojal and Tashkurgan) and Uyghur (Kashgar). See p239 for more about the ethnic mix along the KKH, and the Language chapter for a list of useful words and phrases.

Dangers & Annoyances

TRAVEL IN INDUS KOHISTAN

Indus Kohistan, off the Highway, is a pretty lawless place. You should seek advice from the police at Dasu, Komila, Pattan or Besham.
before heading up any of Kohistan’s side valleys. See the boxed text, p237.

**SECTARIAN VIOLENCE AROUND GILGIT**

The NA is one of the safest parts of Pakistan, but in 1988 Sunni–Shiite tension erupted in gun battles in the valleys around Gilgit, leaving at least 100 dead. There were smaller incidents in the following years, but electoral reforms in 1994 pacified the religious rabble-rousers (who were elected to comfortable positions), at which point the violence abruptly subsided.

No foreigners were ever injured, but the KKH has sprouted police checkpoints where foreigners must sign a register. Many sign false names for the fun of it, though the logbooks have apparently been used to help embassies find their nationals in emergencies.

In August 2003 there were violent protests in Skardu triggered by disagreements between local Shiite leaders over the syllabus taught at schools. And in January 2005, 11 people died in violent clashes following a shooting attack on a Shiite leader. If you are ever caught in such circumstances, the advice is to retreat to your hotel and stay out of sight of the mob.

**ROCKFALL**

Rockfall hazard on the KKH, side roads including the Gilgit to Skardu road, and on all valley footpaths rises sharply during rainy weather. Walkers and cyclists should simply find something else to do. Rockfall on the Highway may ruin your plans, but it can do far worse. During the research for this book we were caught in a downpour while on the Chapursan Valley road and witnessed rocks larger than our jeep come hurtling down into the river beside the road; thankfully we were on the opposite side of the river. A letter from one traveller describes a harrowing day on the KKH between Karimabad and Gulmit.

A local driver said it was just a matter of scrambling across the rockfall and boarding transport on the other side. But there wasn’t any, so he and his companions decided to continue on foot. Soon rocks were falling around them, and they spent six hours literally cheating death, sometimes hugging the wall, sometimes being forced down to the rising river. At one point a 5m rock smashed to the road just a metre from one of them.

Moral of the story: don’t cross a rockfall hoping to find transport on the other side; the whole road is probably littered with rocks, with more to come. Go back and wait for the mountainsides to settle and the roads to be cleared.

**UNREST IN XINJIANG**

In early 1997 somewhere between 10 and 100 people died in riots in Yining, about 400km west of Ürümqi (the capital of Xinjiang), while more bombs exploded in Ürümqi, in Qorla (east of Kashgar) and on a Beijing bus. The Chinese government’s response was swift and ruthless, with Uyghur sources claiming thousands of executions. As a result there has hardly been a dent in regional tourism, and there appears to be no danger for visitors.

Since 2001 it appears that China has taken advantage of the West’s ‘war on terrorism’ to continue to exert its will over Xinjiang’s Islamic populace.

**Getting There & Around**

The nominal southern end of the KKH is at Havelian in Pakistan’s NWFP, but in practice it’s at Islamabad or Rawalpindi. Islamabad has a limited number of direct international air connections, including Kashgar, plus others via Lahore and Karachi (see p86).

You can reach the KKH by train from all over Pakistan. Most trains to the capital area go to Rawalpindi’s Saddar Bazaar station (p87), and a spur of the Rawalpindi to Peshawar line runs to Havelian. The best bet from Lahore is to take one of the air-con bus services to Rawalpindi.

The northern end of the KKH is at Kashgar in China’s Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Kashgar is linked by air to Islamabad and via the provincial capital, Ürümqi, to major Chinese cities and other international points. Overland, Kashgar is linked by bus and train to Ürümqi, from where railway lines run to Chinese cities and to Almaty in Kazakhstan. Warm-weather roads cross the Torugart Pass between Kashgar and Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan, and across the Irkeshtam Pass to Osh, also in Kyrgyzstan, and an all-weather road runs between Ürümqi and Almaty.

Domestic transport in Pakistan to/from Islamabad, and to/from Kashgar in China, is covered in detail in the Transport chapter and within the Getting There & Away sections of the respective cities.
CYCLING KASHGAR TO ISLAMABAD
These notes are presented from north to south because cycling in that direction prolongs the good weather in the best travelling season, which is September and October. An alternative route over the Babusar Pass and through the Kaghan Valley is described on p255.

For information on bringing bicycles into China, see p385. For more information on equipment, safety and security on the KKH, see p392.

KASHGAR TO KHUNJERAB PASS
Food is scarce between Kashgar and Tashkurgan and between Tashkurgan and Sost. Water is scarce on the Kashgar plain, and between Kara Kul and the Khunjerab Pass. Checkpoints make good overnight stops, and it’s possible to stay in private homes.

Kashgar to Ghez, about 120km
Overall, the road south from Kashgar is fairly level for 80km, before climbing steeply to Ghez. Upal, about 50km from Kashgar, has fruit, samosas and other snacks. The Ghez checkpoint has basic food and accommodation.

Ghez to Kara Kul, about 70km
Above Ghez the road climbs steeply for 40km through a canyon where landslides may block the road during rainstorms. Travellers exploring the sand dune area at the top of the canyon have been warned off by mounted police. From there it’s gradually uphill, then steep for a few kilometres to Kara Kul lake, where there are a couple of resorts, yurt accommodation and camping.

Kara Kul to Tashkurgan, about 100km
The 30km rising road to the Subash Plateau (at about 4000m the second-highest point on the KKH) is a long grind but not outrageously steep for most of the way. About 60km from Kara Kul is the abandoned Kekyor checkpoint. A truck stop perches on the steep climb south out of the Tagharma Basin. Tashkurgan is the only place between Kashgar and Sost that has real restaurants.

Tashkurgan to Pirali, about 100km
Over recent years the Chinese have (again) not allowed cyclists to cycle between Tashkurgan and the Khunjerab Pass, insisting cyclists put their bike onto the roof of a bus. However, the situation could always change. The bumpy road goes slightly downhill before rising towards the Pirali checkpoint. Cyclists have spent the night at the settlement of Davdar, which also has a truck stop. Soldiers at Pirali, about 45km from Davdar, might let you stay the night.

Pirali to Khunjerab Pass, about 40km
A gradually increasing grade, quite steep by the time you near the top. Altitude becomes the major challenge as you approach the pass.

KHUNJERAB PASS TO HUNZA
Food, water and accommodation are plentiful beyond Sost and the road is wide and paved. There are no major climbs southbound. Your Chinese bus driver may allow you to hop off the bus on the Pakistani side and ride down to Sost. The Pakistani officials are usually very relaxed about this.

Khunjerab Pass to Sost, 85km
The road on the Pakistan side twists itself into switchbacks for 17km before descending steeply to Dih, about 50km from the top. From there it’s a gentle descent to Sost. Abandoned KKH work camps make camping spots, and Dih has a national park resthouse where you can pitch a tent.

Sost to Passu, about 40km
A gentle downhill ride. There are basic hotels with hot showers at Gircha (a few kilometres south of Sost) and Morkhun, about 12km from Sost. Khyber, about 20km from Sost, has a village guesthouse and a basic inn. Passu’s dilapidated Batura Inn has a ‘rumour’ book with cyclists’ comments.
Passu to Gulmit, 16km
Sharp climbs include the 4km ascent from Passu south to Yashvandan.

Gulmit to Ganish, 34km
The road is fairly level but often plagued with rockfall damage. Karimabad is a steep 2km climb on a link road a few kilometres west of Ganish. Ganish, Aliabad (5km southwest of Ganish) and Murtazaabad (a further 8km along the Highway) have local hotels.

HUNZA TO GILGIT

Ganish to Pisan (Minapin turn-off), about 25km
From the bridge over the Hunza River it’s an unpaved 3km to the recommended Diran Hotel at Minapin, with a steep down-and-up at Minapin Nala (nala is Urdu for tributary canyon).

Pisan to Chalt turning, about 25km
There is food and shelter at Ghulmet Nala, about 5km west of Pisan (2km from Minapin). Chalt is about 4km off the KKH, and has simple accommodation.

Chalt turn-off to Gilgit, about 55km
Basic food and charpoys (simple beds made of ropes knotted together on a wooden frame) are available at Jaglot Guar, about 14km from the Chalt turning. The shortest route into Gilgit from the north is via a tunnel and two suspension bridges (turn off the KKH at Dainyor).

GILGIT REGION
Gilgit is 10km off the KKH. Most people cycling the KKH start or finish here, avoiding the headaches of Indus Kohistan.

Gilgit to Shatial has no long climbs in either direction, but lots of lung-busters under 4km long. There is a significant risk of dehydration and heatstroke between Raikot Bridge and Shatial.

Gilgit to Raikot Bridge, 80km
Jaglot, about 20km south of Gilgit, has serais (cheap travellers’ inns) and a small hotel. The best overnight stop between Gilgit and Chilas is the scenic Northern Areas Public Works Department (NAPWD) resthouse at Talechi, about 62km from Gilgit; book it with the NAPWD chief engineer (☎ 05811-50307) in Gilgit, or camp out in the garden. Don’t count on finding food there. There’s an expensive hotel at Raikot Bridge.

Raikot Bridge to Chilas, 54km
Gonar Farm, about 25km from Raikot Bridge, has one or two serais. At several slide-zones, the road can be potholed, bumpy or washed out. There are several tourist hotels on the KKH at Chilas. Three kilometres before Chilas is the upgraded road following Thak Nala to Babusar Pass. When completed, this will no doubt become the route of choice for cyclists (and other traffic). See the boxed text on p255 for a description of the route.

Chilas to Shatial, 62km
Shatial has a basic inn where some cyclists have been turned away and a primitive resthouse where you may sleep on the veranda.

INDUS KOHISTAN
Cyclists, with expensive gear and skintight clothing that may offend orthodox Muslims, are especially vulnerable in Indus Kohistan. There are unverified stories of assaults, though cyclists mostly

(Continued on page 244)
report petty theft and stone-throwing kids, mainly south of Dasu. Camping near police or army installations is comforting and pleasant.

**Shatial to Dasu, 63km**
This stretch has no major climbs or descents. Sumer Nala, about 30km downriver from Shatial, is a small truck stop with food and charpoys. The Pakistan Tourist Development Corporation (PTDC) has a motel at Barsin, 15km north of Dasu, and Dasu boasts a few pleasant hotels.

**Dasu to Besham, about 80km**
The road climbs high on the canyon wall, with lots of ups and downs. Resthouses and basic food are at Kayal Valley, Pattan and Dubair Valley, respectively about 30km, 40km and 60km south of Dasu.

**HAZARA**
The KKH is wide and paved, but from Mansehra south, traffic is heavy and drivers are reckless.

**Besham to Chattar Plain, about 70km**
As the KKH climbs out of the Indus Valley at Thakot, 28km south of Besham, the road is vulnerable to slides. Batagram is about 20km up from Thakot. The road climbs for 16km beyond this to a 1670m pass at Sharkul, and then drops for several kilometres into Chattar Plain.

**Chattar Plain to Mansehra, about 50km**
It’s downhill most of the way to Mansehra. There is cheap food along the road south of Shinkiari. An alternative route is on the back road that strikes east from the KKH at Batal to Dadar, and from there south to Shinkiari.

**Mansehra to Hasan Abdal, about 100km**
From Mansehra it’s about 30km to Abbottabad, with an overall rise of about 200m. In the 15km from Abbottabad to Havelian the KKH plunges almost 500m. South of Havelian the road is flat for 60km to Hasan Abdal.

**RAWALPINDI & ISLAMABAD**
The flat 50km or so from Hasan Abdal to Rawalpindi is via the Grand Trunk Rd, a high-speed divided highway that is neither enjoyable nor very safe for cyclists. Alternative routes to Islamabad/Rawalpindi are a very hilly 200km from Mansehra via Gahri Habibullah, Muzaffarabad and Kohala, and a steep and hilly 130km or so from Abbottabad via Thandiani and Murree.

**HAZARA**
Roughly speaking, Hazara is that part of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) east of the Indus; a series of fertile plains and terraced or forested hills rising from north of the Grand Trunk Rd into the Lesser Himalaya. Today’s Hazara Division consists of the Abbottabad and Mansehra districts, and since the 1970s the Kohistan district, reaching west from the Indus into the Hindu Raj mountains.

Southern Hazara was a favourite gateway from the plains into Kashmir for expanding regimes – the Mughals, the Afghan Durranis who defeated local tribes in 1752, and the Sikhs who wrested it away during the period 1818–24. After the First Sikh War (1846), Major James Abbott came here as a British ‘adviser’ to the Sikhs; on the Sikhs’ defeat in the Second Sikh War (1849) he became Hazara Division’s first deputy commissioner. Abbottabad, the divisional headquarters, is named after him.

Some towns still have the remains of old Sikh forts, as well as gurdwaras (Sikh temples) built in the 20th century. The Sikh population only evacuated at Partition. The road to Kashmir was severed at Partition, and now
Hazara’s main artery is the KKH, ascending for 160km from Havelian to the Indus River at Thakot.

**HARIPUR & HAVELOIAN**

Haripur ☎️ 0596 / Havelian ☎️ 0992

Haripur, a dusty and chaotic town 34km north of the Grand Trunk Rd, was once Hazara’s ‘capital’. It was founded in 1822 as the headquarters of the Sikh General Hari Singh, after whom it’s named. In 1853 the British moved all its administrative functions to Abbottabad, and Haripur’s importance waned.

Half an hour north of Haripur is Havelian, another nondescript bazaar, with one claim to fame: it’s the official southern end of the KKH, and there was already a road through to Abbottabad before the KKH was even an idea. But there is a kind of geographical boundary: from here the road leaps out of the plain into the hills, rising nearly 500m in the 15km to Abbottabad.

**Getting There & Away**

There are two busy routes north to Haripur from the Grand Trunk Rd (GT Rd). At Hasan Abdal (p90) there’s a sign welcoming you to the KKH although it’s not the official start of the Highway. The alternative route strikes north from Taxila. Both routes to Haripur suffer heavy truck traffic.

The daily Hazara Express train from/to Rawalpindi (Rs 38) departs Rawalpindi at 8.30am (arriving at 12.30pm), and the return leg departs Havelian at 10.45am (arriving at 2.45pm). Buses to Abbottabad (Rs 7) or Mansehra (Rs 30) wait outside the train station. There are also frequent minibuses to Abbottabad and Mansehra at the other end of the bazaar.

**ABBOTTABAD**

☎️ 0992 / pop 881,000 / elevation 1255m

Abbottabad (ab-it-uh-baad), Hazara’s headquarters and biggest town, was founded as a British garrison town in the 1850s, and the shady gardens, church bells and wide streets in the Cantonment evoke the colonial era. Beside the Cantonment is a compact and vibrant bazaar. At 1220m, Abbottabad has a cool climate, and one of the country’s finest hill-station retreats is an hour away at Thandiani. Southbound cyclists should take a rest and contemplate the scenic mountain
route via Murree rather than the truck-choked KKH. Apart from changing money for an excursion into the Kaghan Valley there’s little reason for other travellers to make a halt.

The town has a sizable Christian minority and three active churches (Presbyterian, Anglican and Catholic). The language of the region is Hindko Punjabi, but you can get by with English and a little Urdu.

Orientation
North of the general bus stand is a roundabout, Fowara Chowk. Down the right fork is the Mall (Mansehra Rd). The left fork is Jinnah Rd, running by the bazaar and Cantonment before rejoining the Mall.

Information
BOOKSHOPS
Variety Book Stall (Club Rd) Limited number of English titles plus stationery.

INTERNET ACCESS
There are several internet cafés in town, usually open daily from around 9am to midnight.
Abbottabad Online (AOL; Id Gah Rd; per hr Rs 20)
Robz Internet Cafe (Pine View Rd; per hr Rs 20)
Sarban Internet Cafe (Jinnah Rd; per hr Rs 20) In a relatively quiet location.

MEDICAL SERVICES
Ayub Teaching Hospital (Mansehra Rd, Mandian) It’s 5km north of the Mall.
District Headquarters Teaching Hospital (Id Gah Rd) East of the Mall.

MONEY
Change money here if you’re heading for the Kaghan Valley, as no banks in the valley will do it.
City Money Exchange (Pine View Rd, 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Will change cash US dollars, euros and UK pounds.
Muslim Commercial Bank (cnr Jinnah & Id Gah Rds) Cashes travellers cheques and changes cash.
National Bank (Jail Rd) Cashes travellers cheques and changes cash. The main branch is near the courts and there’s another on Id Gah Rd.
UBL Bank (Pine View Rd) Changes cash (US dollars, euros, UK pounds) only.

POST
Post office (cnr Club & Central Rds)

TELEPHONE
There are numerous Public Call Offices (PCOs) in the bazaar.
Pak Telecom Exchange (Pine View Rd; 24hr) Can place overseas calls.

TOURIST INFORMATION
Conservator of Forests (9310232; Jail Rd) Can book forestry resthouses in Thandiani, Dadar or Kaghan.
Pakistan Tourist Development Corporation (PTDC; 9546275; 9am-3pm Mon-Thu & Sat, 9am-noon Fri Sep-May) Across from Cantonment Public Park, this is one of the more friendly and useful PTDC offices. PTDC can help book transportation and tours (eg Kaghan Valley or Swat), government resthouses and private accommodation options in the region.

Sights & Activities
ABBOTTABAD TOWN
With its orderly tree-lined streets, European architecture and grand parade ground, the Cantonment is the town’s historical heart. St Luke’s Church (cnr Central & Jinnah Rds), near the PTDC, is as old as the town. A melancholy Christian cemetery is 500m up Circular Rd.

Abbottabad’s other persona is the bazaar, a congested quarter of crumbling colonial architecture, full of noise, traffic and the smells of cooking oil and barbecued meat. In Gurdwara Bazaar (off Jinnah Rd), beneath the arch, is a former gurdwara built in 1943, abandoned at Partition and now used as municipal offices.

SHIMLA PEAK
The hills cradling Abbottabad are Shimla Peak to the northwest and Sarban Peak to the south. Shimla’s cool, pine-clad summit is woven with trails and features fine panoramas of the town and its surroundings. You can walk up (three steep kilometres) or take a passenger Suzuki (Rs 5) from upper Pine View Rd; ask for Shimla pahari (pa-ree).

ILYASI MOSQUE
This striking mosque, with a complex of spring-fed bathhouses and pools, is 5km east on the Murree road, near Nawar Sheher village. A small bazaar nearby has basic teashops. Catch a Suzuki (Rs 10 to Rs 20) to Nawar Sheher from the Suzuki stand on Id Gah Rd.

Sleeping
BUDGET
North of Abbottabad at Mandian, the Pakistan Youth Hostel Association (PYHA) hostel is
quite isolated unless you’re cycling or driving. If you’re not, take a Suzuki to Mandian from Id Gah Rd.

**Al-Zahra Hotel** *(330155; Fowara Chowk; s/d/tr Rs 250/250/350)* Next door to the more obvious Ramlina Hotel is the almost grandiose but neglected Al-Zahra. Spacious, adequately clean rooms and a shady veranda provide a lingering colonial air. Hot water is available on request.

**Bolan Hotel** *(334395; Fowara Chowk; s/d Rs 210/300)* The worn and rather grubby Bolan near the general bus stand offers the cheapest acceptable rooms with hot showers.

**Pineview Hotel** *(335555; Jinnah Rd; d Rs 300)* The Pineview is a fine chaikhana (teahouse) with a lively location but it’s a barely satisfactory hotel. The poky rooms surprisingly boast cable TV. Mind your head as you enter.

**Ramlina Hotel** *(334431; Fowara Chowk; s/d/tr Rs 200/350/600)* The Ramlina has grotty singles though the bigger rooms get more care. There’s running hot water and a bare-bones restaurant, but its best feature is that it is convenient for onward transport.

**New Faisal Hotel** *(334406; The Mall; s/d Rs 250/350)* The tiny rooms are well kept but resonate with traffic noise. You’ll find that other options in the vicinity are not interested in foreigners.

**MIDRANGE & TOP END**

**Al Faiz Hotel** *(340896; Pine View Rd; d/tr Rs 1000/1200)* You can be sure of a friendly welcome at Al Faiz; however, since our last visit the rooms have deteriorated, the prices have sky-rocketed and the restaurant has closed.

**Sarban Hotel** *(31508; fax 334436; The Mall; d Rs 1000-2300; )* The best place to stay in town, the Sarban is between the bazaar and the Cantonment and close to transport options. There’s a multicuisine restaurant and a travel desk, and the standard rooms are clean with TV, fan, bathtubs and limitless hot water.

**Pearl Continental** *(334717; fax 334707; KKH/ Mansehra Rd, Mandian; s/d Rs 3450/4025; )* This is a poorer cousin of the big bold PCs elsewhere, but it has very comfortable, well-appointed rooms and the high-quality Nadia restaurant (see Eating right). Breakfast and tax are included in the tariff. It’s located a couple of kilometres north of central Abbottabad in Mandian. Check out the funky bat-cave nightclub, Rasalus Café.

**Eating**

**New Kaghan Café** *(340896; cnr Pine View & Jinnah Rds; mains Rs 50-120; % 10am-11.30pm)* This inexpensive restaurant is the best option close to the bazaar. Recommended dishes are the chicken qormaa (yogurt-based curry; Rs 80), mutton palak (spinach mutton; Rs 80), chicken tikka (Rs 55) and fragrant chicken biryani (Rs 65).

**New Friends Café** *(Jinnah Rd; mains Rs 50-195; % 10am-midnight)* This busy curry and chapati eatery has a small selection of mutton and chicken dishes, such as the ubiquitous mutton karai (mutton braised with vegetables and served bubbling in its own pan; Rs 70). Vegetarians will hopefully find dhal (Rs 25), but not much else.

**Rainbow Café** *(Jinnah Rd)* Close to the New Friends Café and serving up similar food.

**Mona Lisa Restaurant** *(334131; Jinnah Rd; mains Rs 60-250; % 10am-11.30pm)* Adjacent to the PTDC in the Cantonment, this bright roadside eatery boasts a huge menu of Pakistani, Chinese and Continental mains plus snacks and barbecue fare. But first ask what is available and fresh.

Most of the hotels have restaurants attached and these range in quality and price from the chaikhana at Pineview Hotel *(Jinnah Rd; mains Rs 30-50), with a great balcony to watch life down on the street, to the upmarket Nadia *(Pearl Continental Hotel, Mansehra Rd, Mandian; mains Rs 185-350; % 7am-11pm)*, with an extensive Chinese, Continental and Pakistani menu.

West of the bazaar, there are a couple of streets dedicated to meat and vegetable stalls.

**Shopping**

Hazará embroidery is a local speciality. Small shops in the bazaar have good deals on shawls and other items.

**Getting There & Away**

The general bus stand is south of Fowara Chowk, and nearby are some smaller yards dedicated to the numerous minibuses or larger and more-comfortable Coasters travelling to Thandiani, Rawalpindi and Swat/Peshawar, which leave when full. For Kohistan or the Kaghan Valley, change at Mansehra. You may need to do the same for destinations north on the KKH. Destinations from Abbottabad include the following:

**Aliabad** *(Hunga; Rs 750)* Silk Route buses and Coasters pass through the general bus stand after originating in Rawalpindi, but are often full.
Gilgit (Rs 750) As for Aliabad. 
Lahore (Rs 200/300 non air-con/air-con, eight hours) Bus to Grand Trunk Rd bus stand. Air-con bus goes to the motorway.
Mansehra (Rs 20, one hour) Minibus.
Mardan (Rs 100, two hours) Most of the Peshawar- and Mingora-bound transport stops here en route.
Mingora (Swat district; Rs 240, six hours) Bus.
Murree (Rs 70, five hours) Minibus.
Peshawar (Rs 100, three hours) Minibus. Air-con Coasters (Rs 120) are worth the small extra expense.
Rawalpindi/Islamabad (Rs 75, 2½ hours) Minibuses leave all day from the general bus stand and next to the Al-Zahra Hotel. More comfortable air-con Coasters (Rs 85) also go to Rawalpindi from the general bus stand.
Thandiani (Rs 50, one hour) Minibus.

Getting Around
The yard for passenger Suzukis is down an alley east of the Mount View Hotel on Id Gah Rd. They usually clog Id Gah Rd and run up and down the Mall all day for Rs 5. Taxis will use the meter if it is demanded, though it is easier to fix a price – about Rs 50 from one end of town to the other.

Thandiani (taan-dee-aa-nee), a series of 2700m forested ridges northeast of Abbottabad, is the northernmost of the hill-station retreats called the Galis (p90). The air is cool and clean, development is minimal and there are views east across the Pir Panjal Range, and north even to Nanga Parbat in clear weather. Thandiani means ‘cool place’, so bring extra layers. Long day trips from Abbottabad are possible, organised by the PTDC (see p247).

Sleeping & Eating
Far Pavilions Hotel (tents/d Rs 300/400) This little hotel at the bus terminus has two doubles as well as tents in summer. It may also offer cheaper charpoys (rope beds) or camping sites. Bookings can be made through the PTDC (p247) or the travel desk at the Sarban Hotel (p248) in Abbottabad. A café and pakora (deep-fried vegetable) shops are open in summer.
A Communications & Works (C&W) resthouse and forestry resthouse here are rarely available, but inquire at Abbottabad PTDC.

Getting There & Away
Thandiani is an hour’s ride from Abbottabad on a winding road beside the Kalapani River, through terraced fields and pine and deodar forest. Minibuses (Rs 50) leave when full from Fowara Chowk or you could negotiate a special hire of a Suzuki or taxi (Rs 400).

MANSEHRA
@ 0978 / pop 52,095
Tourists don’t pay much attention to Mansehra except to get out and squint at three rocks on the northern outskirts, on which King Ashoka inscribed a set of edicts over 2200 years ago. The bazaar is lively, bearing traces of the town’s history as a Sikh garrison town in the early 19th century. If you can tolerate the gridlocked traffic, it’s a great place for people-watching, with a rich mix of Pashtuns, Punjabis and Kashmiris. The most common language is Pashto, with some Hindko Punjabi.
Mansehra is a major transportation junction for Rawalpindi, Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK), the Kaghan and Swat Valleys, and the KKH.

Orientation
The KKH skirts Mansehra, but local roads, named for their old destinations – Abbottabad, Shinkiari village and Kashmir – converge on the bridge in the middle of town. Most buses use the general bus stand 1.5km north of town, though some local minibuses arrive at the old GTS stand south of the bridge. Through buses may drop you on the KKH near the Ashoka Rocks; from there it’s a 1km walk into town along Shinkiari Rd.

Information
The telephone exchange and post office are above the bazaar out on Kashmir Rd. The police can be found in the Sikh Fort nearby. The National Bank, above and behind Kashmir Bazaar, changes cash and travellers cheques. Internet cafés, such as Hazara Internet Café (per hr Rs 20), are not very reliable.

Sights
ASHOKA ROCKS
On the north side of town is Mansehra’s tourist attraction, three granite boulders on which 14 edicts were engraved by order of the Mauryan king Ashoka in the 3rd century BC. Appalled by the destruction wreaked by his military campaigns, Ashoka converted to Buddhism and tried to dictate a new morality based on piety, moderation, tolerance and
respect for life. He was greatly revered, but his reforms (and his empire) didn’t last much longer than he did. The inscriptions have done better, but they too are fading away; despite the shelters, the ancient Karoshthi script is now almost impossible to see. The rocks uphill are better than the one below the road.

FORMER SIKH TEMPLE (LIBRARY)
Up Kashmir Rd is the three-storey Gurdwara Siri Guru Singh Saba, a pastiche of colours and styles. Built in 1937 as a gurdwara, it’s now the Mansherra Municipal Library (8am-1pm Mon-Sun, women only Mon). The ornate interior hasn’t been altered much.

SIKH FORT
Up a laneway 300m past the library is a fort, built in the early 19th century by Sikh governor general Man Singh (after whom Mansherra is named), and rebuilt by the British after the Second Sikh War and the annexation of the Sikh state. It now houses a police office and a jail. Very few traces of the original mud-and-rock structure can be seen inside.

BAZAARS
Shinkiari and Kashmir Rds curve round a hill, with Kashmir Bazaar sprawled across the top, its narrow lanes in semipermanent shadow. Across the bridge along Jaffar Rd is the smaller, older Neelam (or Jerah) Bazaar.

Sleeping
Zam Zam Hotel (305127; off Shinkiari Rd; s/d Rs 100/130, s/d with toilet Rs 150/180) Small, passably clean rooms have hot showers and there’s a restaurant on site. It’s hidden away, 50m west of the bridge.

Errum Hotel (300245; Shinkiari Rd; s/d Rs 350/650; ) The Errum has clean, good-value doubles with hot shower, TV and phone. There’s a rooftop patio plus very welcoming hosts. On the downside, the singles have very tiny bathrooms and there are only two rooms with air-con.

Taj Mahal (306505; Abbottabad Rd; s/d Rs 450/850) The friendly Taj Mahal boasts clean rooms with hot showers, cable TVs and some even have a fridge. Rooms vary in size so it’s worth inspecting a few before committing. There’s a simple restaurant on site.

Karakuram Hotel (302579; fax 303165; KKH; s/d/q Rs 575/1150/2500; ) Mansherra’s best place to stay, with clean though rather solemn rooms and capable management. Aimed at tour groups, there is a recommended restaurant, and the only drawback is that it is 1km south of town, well away from the general bus stand.

Eating
Abbottabad Rd food is cheap and good. Little cafés serve braised mutton, chapli kebabs (spicy mutton burgers), omelettes and thick northern-style noodle soup. There are enough vegetable and fruit stalls to keep vegetarians going.

The town’s best restaurants are in the hotels. Recommended are the budget Taj Mahal (Abbottabad Rd; mains Rs 50-130) and the midrange...
Karakuram Hotel (mains Rs 100-350) with Chinese, Continental and Pakistani fare.

Getting There & Away

The local minibus stand (Abbottabad Rd) has departures for Abbottabad (Rs 20) and irregular trips to Haripur (Rs 50) and Rawalpindi (Liaquat Chowk) only.

For other destinations or modes of transport, take a Suzuki (Rs 5) from Shinkiari Rd to the general bus stand, 1.5km north of town on the KKH. It’s a large and hectic yard, but help is never far away. Just ask one of the many spruikers.

For the Kaghan Valley, there are minibuses to Balakot and sometimes Naran, as well as slower buses. For destinations north, go to Northern Areas Transport Company (Natco; 0301471) near the general bus stand beside the KKH. You may be able to guarantee a seat by ringing Natco’s Rawalpindi office (051-9278441, 051-5462181). Buses and Coasters such as Natco’s run to a timetable, but the minibuses mostly leave when uncomfortably full.

Balakot (Rs 30) Minibuses, some heading on to Naran, leaving all day.

Batagram (Rs 60) Minibus.

Besham (Rs 120) Minibuses leaving all day.

Gilgit (Rs 800) Various Coasters and buses originating from Rawalpindi. Natco has five departures a day.

Islamabad (Rs 90, 3½ hours) Minibuses leaving all day.

Karachi (Rs 1000) Air-con buses each day.

Lahore (Rs 300) Air-con buses each day.

Muzaffarabad (Rs 60) Minibuses leaving all day.

Naran (Rs 100) Minibuses leaving all day when road open.

Rawalpindi (Rs 90 to Rs 100, 3½ hours) Buses leaving all day.

Skardu (Rs 700/850 minibuses) Natco has two departures originating from Rawalpindi in the afternoon (3pm and 6pm).

Kaghan Valley

Embraced by the cool forested peaks of the Lesser Himalaya, this 160km-long valley drained by the burbling Kunhar River is one of Pakistan’s most popular summer holiday spots. The verdant valley is not without its problems of crowding, litter and gouging hoteliers during the brief holiday season, but outside the summer peak, you will find the promised tranquillity though many of the hotels will have closed their doors.

The 2005 Kashmir earthquake devastated the town of Balakot and destroyed many roads in the steep-sided Kaghan Valley. On-going land slippage and subsequent savage winters have hindered roadworks, which were frequent enough even before the earthquake, and restoration of phone and power lines. Rebuilding was very much in evidence at the time of writing but it will be many years before this region returns to normal in terms of access and accommodation.

At the valley head is the 4175m Babusar Pass into the Indus Valley at Chilas. In 1892 the British established a supply line across this pass, one of only two to Gilgit from the outside world. The other, the Burzil Pass from Kashmir, was closed by the 1949 ceasefire, leaving just the Babusar to link the NA with the rest of Pakistan until the KKH was built. It’s open for several weeks each summer, a challenging alternative to the KKH between Mansehra and Chilas.

Work has commenced on improving the road, particularly on the Chilas side, but it is expected to take several years before this becomes a viable short cut to Chilas for general transport.

The valley population consists of a string of villages along the river, plus a biannual migration of Gujrars, who fan out with their animals into the high pastures of Hazara (and Swat and Chitral) in May and June, returning in September and October.

Several treks out of the valley are described in Lonely Planet’s Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush.

Orientation

The valley’s gateway, Balakot, is 39km from Mansehra. The valley road is more or less paved up to Naran, though there are numerous interruptions due to land slippage, much of it associated with the 2005 earthquake. From Naran to Babusar Pass it’s 70km of gradually deteriorating jeep track. Four-wheel drives and other vehicles can be hired in Balakot or Naran, with rates dropping in the off season.

When to Go

By May, Shogran and Naran are usually accessible by 4WD. Hotel prices and occupancy rates are low at this time, but many of the scenic attractions are still under snow. High season begins in earnest in June. The monsoon brings rain and numerous temporary roadblocks in July and August, but upvalley travel is possible. August is the best time for
KAGHAN VALLEY

The external boundaries of Pakistan & India on this map have not been authenticated and may not be correct.
a jeep crossing of the Babusar Pass, at least until the road is completely upgraded.

Fine weather returns in September and October, with the nights getting colder and the chance of snow in late October. From late November to early April snow routinely blocks the road beyond Kaghan, and the upper villages are mostly deserted.

**ACCOMMODATION**

Hotels overflow in the tourist season, but prices collapse in May and September/October, when you can negotiate bargains with the handful of hotels that remain open. Don’t count on any hotels in the smaller towns being open after the peak season. Few hotels will offer single-room rates in season.

There are several run-down PYHA hostels, packed with Pakistani students in summer and closed the rest of the year. Few hotels will offer single-room rates in season. There are several run-down PYHA hostels, packed with Pakistani students in summer and closed the rest of the year.

Some government resthouses are available on the rare occasions when officials aren’t using them. Make inquiries about the availability of hotels and government resthouses in the valley at the PTDC in Abbottabad (see p247).

**Balakot**

Balakot (982m) was virtually destroyed in the 2005 earthquake and many lives were lost. At the time of research one hotel remained standing amid the tangle of tents and temporary shelters. The bazaar was bustling beneath its makeshift shelter of corrugated-iron sheets and blue plastic tarps. There is a great deal of energetic rebuilding and obvious resistance to government plans to resite the town 30km towards Mansehra at Bakrial.

The PTDC operates a restaurant, at the southern end of town, but at the time of research there was no tourist information, no vehicle hire and little accommodation here. The police, post office, telephone exchange and hospital were operating in temporary buildings in their old locations, all a short walk south of the PTDC office. Banks here don’t do foreign exchange, and you can’t change money elsewhere in the Kaghan Valley.

The Hotel Serenity (501182; d/tr Rs 600/2500; a) can be found at the back of a shopping arcade – apparently the only large building to remain standing, and displaying some impressive cracks. The spacious, clean and quiet rooms have morning and evening hot water. Air-con is only available in the expensive triple. The hotel has a multicuisine restaurant (mains Rs 50 to Rs 200) which specialises in Chinese meals.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

The general bus stand and jeep lot are north of Hotel Serenity, down the hill. Buses and minibuses go to Mansehra (Rs 30) all day, departing when full. For Muzaffarabad, take a bus or Suzuki to Garhi Habibullah (Rs 20), and catch a Mansehra–Muzaffarabad bus (Rs 40).

Depending on road conditions, buses, pickups and minibuses go to Naran (Rs 100) all day in June and July; out of season you may have to take a jeep to Naran or transfer to one in Kaghan.

**Kawai & Shogran**

Kawai has a small number of very basic hotels with no reason other than road closures to stay there. At Shogran, the friendly Tourist Inn (432236; d Rs 2000) has clean, rudimentary rooms, some with excellent balcony views, and a restaurant. Other budget options with fine views include Hotel Serenity (432282; d Rs 400-1000), and the Punjab and the Marshee Breeze, which were being rebuilt at the time of research.

At the top end the enormous Pine Park (410333; s/d from Rs 1500/3000, cottages Rs 6000) largely survived the quake and is almost worth the price, more so when you negotiate a low-season discount. There are various rooms and cottages, a restaurant, and local guides and jeep transport for hire.

A minibus or pick-up is about Rs 50 from Balakot to Kawai. From there a special jeep can be hired for Rs 350 up to Shogran. A special jeep from Shogran to Sri Paya is Rs 800 one way.
Paras & Sharan
At Paras, 6km north of Kawai, a rough track crosses the river and climbs 15km to Sharan, in the middle of a forest at 2400m. From there you can hike through the forest or trek overnight across to the Siran Valley, north of Mansehra. A local guide is a must. A special jeep from Paras to Sharan is around Rs 800.
Paras has a budget hotel and at Sharan there’s a basic PYHA hostel and a forestry resthouse that can be booked with help from the PTDC in Abbottabad (see p247).

Khanian & Kaghan
The undeveloped village of Khanian, at an attractive turn of the Kunhar River, offers a quiet place to stay if the tourist hordes are getting to you. As well as a few budget hotels there’s a Pine Park cottage that can be booked through the Pine Park Hotel in Naran. From Khanian, a 10km jeep track winds up the hillside to picturesque Danna Meadows.

About the only thing going for the next village of Kaghan is that the road is usually open year-round, so if you can organise accommodation it could make a base for winter trips. Any other time, move on to Naran. There are several budget hotels with basic rooms that are acceptable but overpriced in summer. From Balakot, buses, pick-ups and minibuses pass through on their way to Naran in summer; out of season you may have to hire a jeep.

Naran
At 2400m, Naran is the summertime base for exploring the valley and for the multitude of tourists escaping the heat of the plains. It’s a beehive in the tourist season, choked with jeeps and minibuses, and the hotels are packed (Naran visitors sometimes have to stay in Kaghan). By October the few hotels that remain open may ask less than a fifth of the summer price. From November to April, Naran completely shuts down.

INFORMATION
Following the 2005 earthquake and subsequent access problems, Naran is yet to return to normal. Phone numbers listed here are likely to change when phone lines are restored and road access is likely to remain highly seasonal and tenuous. The PTDC (430002; PTDC Motel) is your best bet for assistance in hiring guides and jeeps. Fishing licences are available at the Fisheries office, by the road to Lake Saiful Mulk, and tackle can be hired from shops in the bazaar.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES
At 3200m, surrounded by moody, snowy mountains, Lake Saiful Mulk (or Muluk) is said to be inhabited by fairies. Legend has it that in ancient times a mortal, Prince Saiful Mulk, fell in love with a fairy there and married her.

It’s a hot two- to three-hour uphill walk from Naran to the lake; the path starts just above the bazaar. Alternatively, you can hire a jeep for Rs 700 from Naran, which can take up to six passengers. The driver will stay at the lake for about an hour, allowing you to go for a horse ride before returning.

The best way to have it all to yourself is to camp. A forestry resthouse at the lake can be booked at the Conservator of Forests (0992-9310232; Jail Rd) in Abbottabad, or you could even sleep on the porch with a sleeping bag.

A day’s further walking takes you east to the edge of the Lalazar Plateau (though this is more easily reached from Battakundi). A jeep to Lalazar Plateau costs around Rs 1000 from Naran.

SLEEPING & EATING
The 2005 earthquake damage and subsequent access problems severely disrupted the holiday seasons in 2006 and 2007. When the situation returns to normal, hotels in Naran will resume charging according to demand. In the peak of summer, if you are lucky enough to find a free room, you will be quoted more than Rs 2000 for a rudimentary double with a tiny bathroom. Most hotels have a restaurant with Pakistani, Chinese and some Continental mains.

There are numerous hotels in the budget category that will charge Rs 300 to Rs 500 for a room either side of the summer season but will happily treble these prices in summer. Most have very basic rooms with less than basic bathrooms and only occasional hot water. Hotels in this category include the Sarhad, Shalimar, Paradise Inn, Kohitoor, Pakistan, Zam Zam and Zero Point at the north end of town; Snow View in the centre; and the Balakot, Frontier, Naran and Kunhar View in the south.

By the road, 3km south of town, is a PYHA hostel, in a state of disrepair. Some midrange places may let you pitch a tent and use their
KARAKORAM HIGHWAY

lonelyplanet.com

HAZARA •• To the Babusar Pass

water and toilets for a small fee (though PTDC won’t).

Better-quality lodgings with room tariffs starting at Rs 800 for a single room and Rs 1000 for a double can be found in the larger hotels such as the Green Park, Pine Park, Lalazar, Troutlands and the PTDC Motel. To stay at the PTDC in summer you will need to book well in advance through the PTDC in Islamabad (see p77).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Minibuses to/from Balakot are Rs 100 and leave from the northern end of the main road when full. Outside of July to September you may have to take a passenger jeep to Kaghan and change, or hire a jeep. The Naran PTDC has no jeeps for hire, but will help you bargain with local drivers. In season, the PTDC runs a daily bus service from Flashman’s Hotel in Rawalpindi, changing to a Coaster at Balakot.

TO THE BABUSAR PASS

The Kaghan Valley’s most dramatic scenery is beyond Naran. Travel here is by 4WD, mountain bike, pony or on foot. Although there are efforts to upgrade the road, most progress has been made on the Chilas side. You should definitely get local advice before crossing the Babusar Pass. The PTDC in Naran (opposite) is a good source; in Chilas, try field officers at the Northern Areas Public Works Department (NAPWD) executive engineer office, or Natco drivers on the Babusar village run.

At Battakundi, 16km up the valley, you can detour 5km up to summer pastures on Lalazar Plateau. There are resthouses in Battakundi and 15km up the valley at Burawai. There is occasional basic (charpoy) accommodation at Battakundi and Besal, though you may find the latter deserted.

The road degenerates to a barely jeepable track 20km beyond Burawai, at Besal. From there you can detour about 15km east to beautiful green Lake Dudipat, or stay on the main track for about 3km to Lake Lulusar, the biggest natural lake in Hazara and the source of the Kunhar River. Here you may see Gujar encampments in the summer.

CYCLING THE BABUSAR PASS & KAGHAN VALLEY

Some who have cycled over the 4175m pass say it’s only sensible on a lightly loaded mountain bike, and only if you’re in very good shape. Road improvements in progress should eventually make this the route of choice. Food from Chilas to Naran is very basic when available – dhal, chapati, sometimes rice. Camping is not advisable from Chilas to Gittidas.

Chilas to Babusar Pass, 52km

There is a steadily improving road up Thak Nala, starting 3km east of Chilas. The 39km from there to Babusar village, with a primitive resthouse and a few cheap inns and shops, is progressively improving but there are still many very rocky kilometres either side of the pass.

Babusar Pass to Naran, about 70km

The pass is about 35km before Burawai, and the track over it is still awful. You can camp safely from Lake Lulusar to Naran. At Burawai there’s a resthouse and charpoy hotel. Battakundi, 15km on, has a resthouse, a forestry hut, a collapsing PYHA youth hostel and a teashop. It’s then 16 steep kilometres to Naran.

Naran to Balakot, 83km

The road is more or less paved beyond Naran though there are numerous slippage areas. The stretch beyond Kaghan has cheap hotels at Khanian and Mahandri. From Paras, 30km before Balakot, a jeep track climbs 15km to 20km to Sharan. From Kawai, 24km before Balakot, a very steep, mostly paved road climbs 1300m in 8km to beautiful Shogran.

Balakot to Mansehra, 42km

The road is hilly and twisting, and drivers are reckless. A slightly less busy alternative is the road via Garhi Habibullah, the junction for the road to/from Muzaffarabad. Garhi Habibullah has food stalls and basic charpoy hotels.
Gittidas, about 6km north of Lake Lulusar, is the southernmost Kohistani village in the region, and not a particularly friendly place to stay the night without a local guide. Cyclists report stone-throwing kids, too. From Gittidas, it’s about 8km to Babusar ‘top’. If the weather is clear, you can walk about 1km east from the pass for views of the Kaghan Valley behind you and Nanga Parbat to the northeast.

Babusar village is 13km north of the pass on the track, or about half that far on a short-cut footpath. In summer there are a few shops and sera open, and a spartan resthouse, which you can only book at the Chilas NAPWD (see p265). Camping is not recommended.

It’s 39km from Babusar village to Chilas on a jeep track that is being rapidly improved along Thak Nala. The new road meets the KKH 3km east of Chilas. Natco makes this trip daily in summer.

Getting There & Away
Until the road improvements have finished, only a small 4WD jeep can manage the narrow, rocky track over the pass in July and August, though even then monsoon rains make it problematic. A one-way jeep rental from Naran to Babusar village/Chilas costs about Rs 3500/5000. The pass is also feasible as a day trip from Naran, for about Rs 3000. Cargo jeeps sometimes go up as far as Besal.

On foot, give yourself at least a week from Naran to Babusar village, which allows for some side trips. Trekking may be possible as early as mid-June (though you’ll still find snow) into October (though most villagers will be gone for the winter by then). Snow normally begins in November. A local guide might be helpful from Gittidas to Babusar village, as not everyone is friendly en route. Naran to Chilas is about 130km.

For information on cycling the Babusar Pass, see the boxed text, p255.

MANSEHRA TO BATAGRAM
The KKH leaves Mansehra and crosses the surrounding Pakhli Plain before rising through terraces of wheat and cornfields. About 35 minutes and 24km north of Mansehra is the village of Shinkhari, where the National Tea Research Institute is selecting varieties for Pakistan’s (largely unsuitable) climate. A few minibuses from Mansehra continue from here up the picturesque Siran River Valley to pine-scented Dadar. You can walk over the mountains into the Kaghan Valley in a few days – from Shinkhari to Balakot, or from Dadar to Balakot or Sharan via Mandu Guch. The hills are said to harbour bears, wild cats and outlaws, so a local guide is a very good idea. The PTDC (see p247) in Abbottabad is a good source of information.

From Shinkhari the KKH climbs through pine plantations into a picturesque bowl called Chattar Plain (named for Chattar Singh, another Sikh general), 1¼ hours from Mansehra. The flat plain stills bears shattered buildings from the earthquake and the many brick-making kilns here are working overtime. An alternative route is by back road from Dadar to Batal village, just south of Chattar Plain. From Chattar Plain the KKH rises at the small settlement of Sharkul, about 14km from Batal, then drops to Batagram, crossing into the Nandihar River basin before dropping towards the Indus River.

Sleeping & Eating
Chattar Motel & Restaurant (  (0987-333191; d Rs 1000) On Chattar Plain, 10km from Batal, the bright Chattar Motel sits in a neatly clipped lawn, and the good restaurant (mains Rs 40 to Rs 250) is a popular lunch stop for tour groups. The comfortable doubles are elaborately wood-lined and the bathrooms, all with hot water, are spacious.

PTDC Chattar (  (0997-333455; s/d Rs 1200/1500) At Sharkul, in the woods above Chattar Plain, the recently constructed PTDC Chattar has four spotless doubles and a small restaurant (mains Rs 60 to Rs 90).

Affaq Hotel (  (0997-333106; d Rs 2000) Next door to the PTDC Chattar, the friendly (though not much English) Affaq has similar rooms but with cable TV in the lounge. Mains here cost Rs 50 to Rs 150.

BATAGRAM
(0987 / pop 183,508)
The Pashtun village of Batagram, straddling the Nandihar River 25km from the Indus, has little to offer visitors other than some hard-to-find Buddhist ruins in the hills near Pishora. Little English is spoken.

Sights & Activities
Across the Nandihar River, about 12km north of the bazaar on the KKH, watch for the cable cars (some of them just rickety seats
suspended from a single cable) that connect villages on the west side of the river to the KKH. For a cheap (make an offer) thrill, try one yourself.

Archaeological researchers say there are **Buddhist ruins** near Pishora village, 8km north of Batagram, though you would need good local help to find them. In the same area, Kala Tassa, there are **petroglyphs** depicting hunters, animals and a Buddhist stupa beneath a rock overhang. The writing refers to a monastery in the time of a Kushan king of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Batagram View Hotel** (☎ 310194; s/d Rs 800/1000) The best accommodation is here on the KKH, 2km south of the bazaar. Geared towards Japanese tour groups, the hotel features a Japanese bathhouse downstairs. Unfortunately, the baths were seriously damaged in the 2005 earthquake and were still awaiting repair when we visited. Oddly, the restaurant (mains Rs 60 to Rs 100) does not feature Japanese cuisine; instead Pakistani, Chinese and a few Continental dishes are available.

Accommodation in town is decidedly more downmarket, and there is little to distinguish the hotels from one another. **Shangri-La Hotel** (d Rs 200), by the bus stop north of the bridge, and **Spogmay Hotel** (s/d Rs 100/200), in the main bazaar, have small rooms with squat toilets.

The chaotic bazaar has very basic, cheap restaurants, and there are fruit vendors in the area. The bright **Thai Hotel & Food Mella** (☎ 310194; s/d Rs 800/1000; 🍆 8am-11pm) restaurant features a Thai Airways colour scheme but no Thai dishes – just Pakistani curries.

**Getting There & Away**

There is a bus yard about 200m south of the bridge, from where minibuses go all day to Thakot (Rs 20, 45 minutes), Besham (Rs 50, 1½ hours) and Manshehra (Rs 45, two hours). You can catch a minibus to Alai (Rs 50, two to three hours), while Karachi-bound buses stop west of the bridge.

**INDUS KOHISTAN**

Rounding the western end of the Himalaya at Nanga Parbat (8125m), the Indus River cuts a gorge so deep that some parts see only a few hours of sunlight a day, and are so inhospitable that even the caravan routes bypassed it. The Highway traveller is surrounded by this fractured, crumbling landscape with barely a blade of grass visible – magnificent and ominous. It’s a landscape in motion; the sheer rock walls are being ripped apart by powerful waterfalls carving out yawning canyons, and rocks lie scattered across the road.

Kohistan (Land of Mountains) refers to the sub-6000m peaks enclosing this canyon as well as upper Swat and Dir. The desolate, crumbling terrain made it one of the most harrowing passages in Asia. The intrepid Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Fa Hsien, having already crossed most of China and the Karakoram on foot, was awestruck. In 403 AD he wrote about Indus Kohistan:

> The road is difficult and broken, with steep crags and precipices in the way. The mountainside is like a stone wall 10,000 feet high. Looking down, the sight is confused and there is no sure foothold.
The roadside bazaars are gloomy even on a sunny day, and on the Highway – sometimes hundreds of metres above the thrashing Indus – you can empathise with Fa Hsien.

Another name for the region was Yaghistan (Land of the Ungoverned). Outlaws could hide here without fear of capture; tribal warfare and blood feuds were commonplace. Stone watchtowers and fortified houses can still be seen in the older villages. Even today outsiders are not very warmly welcomed and travelling off the KKH is not recommended without first seeking police advice.

In the 1960s the KKH cut through the Indus gorge and in 1976 Pakistan created an administrative district out of these semi-autonomous areas. The district government relies heavily on police and the NWFP Frontier Constabulary, whose forts dot the valley.

**THAKOT TO BESHAM**

Twenty-seven kilometres north of Batagram the road drops down to cross the Indus River over an elegant, Chinese-constructed suspension bridge at Thakot. In 1976 a lively party was held here, with Pakistani and Chinese music and dance, to open the bridge and celebrate the completion of the Indus Valley Rd. In many respects this is the real southern end of the KKH, not the Havelian railhead. On the other side of the bridge is the seedy roadside bazaar of Dandai, with the basic Hotel Sapari.

Beside the road, 18km from Thakot and 9km south of Besham, is an obelisk honouring the Kohistan Development Board, which oversaw development of this area after the devastating 1974 Pattan earthquake. The stone marker lists the distances to Karachi, Kashgar, Beijing and other points. It makes a nice photo backdrop.

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**BESHAM**

Besham (beh-shaam) is about midway between Rawalpindi and Gilgit, with several hotels, cheap serais, gun shops and a main road choked with trucks and buses. This is your base for visiting the Alai Valley, and pleasant Dubair Valley is not far away.

Besham is in an eastward bulge of Swat district, and is a mostly Pashtun town. The common speech is Pashto, and Pashtuns call the Indus ‘Abaseen’ (Father of Rivers). The fore-runner of the KKH was meant to link the NA, not south to Mansehra but west to Swat over the scenic Shangla Pass, and Besham is the junction for buses to/from that direction.

**Orientation & Information**

Nearly everything is located on the KKH. Transport up and down the KKH and towards Swat starts from near the road fork to Swat.

For current information on road conditions and the surrounding valleys, ask at the PTDC Motel, south of town. Jan Net Café (per hr Rs 20) is near the budget hotels in the bazaar. South of the bazaar are a post office, phone exchange, banks and, further down, a police post. The district hospital is 250m east down a side road near the Swat junction. The Habib Bank adjacent to the Hotel Continental Besham was installing an ATM (apparently
with international credit capability) at the time of research.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Prince Hotel (☏ 400318; s/d Rs 150/300) The Prince is a rather miserable choice, for the financially embarrassed only. The basic rooms are grotty, as is the small restaurant, but the management is friendly and apparently oblivious to the mould and decay.

Hotel International (☏ 400415; s/d Rs 250/300) The International has worn-out but passably clean rooms with squat toilets and cold shower. This hotel also boasts a crude restaurant.

Abasin Hotel (☏ 400338; s/d Rs 200/400) Just north of the Swat junction and next to the boisterous minibus yard, the Abasin has very ordinary rooms with toilet and cold shower.

Hotel Taj Mahal (☏ 400432; s/d Rs 280/450) Next door to the Abasin, Taj Mahal is even gloomier and most of the rooms are poky. The better rooms are on the top floor, with sit-down toilets and hot water.

Hotel Paris & Restaurant (☏ 400310; s/d/tr Rs 350/450/550) The Hotel Paris is possibly the best of the bazaar cheapies. The rooms are tired but clean with reliable running hot water and some have sit-down toilets and a bathtub.

Rock City Hotel & Restaurant (☏ 400553; d Rs 600) Rock City has adequate though rather pricey rooms overlooking a raging torrent. Back rooms have the river views (and noise). The clean-looking restaurant (mains Rs 80 to Rs 160) has a small selection of Pakistani curries.

MIDRANGE

Palace Mid Way Hotel (☏ 400505; KKH; s/d/tr Rs 700/1000/1200) Just north of town, this welcoming hotel is another very comfortable option with clean rooms arranged around a spacious communal area. Bathrooms are supplied with toiletries and evaporative air coolers are available on request. The restaurant has Pakistani and Chinese cuisine.

Hotel Continental Besham (☏ 400475; KKH; s/d Rs 1100/1400, s/d with air-con Rs 1600/2000) Large (40 rooms) and central with a loquacious and friendly manager. It’s the only place in Besham that can boast reliable air-con, and the spacious rooms have cable TV and clean bathrooms. The restaurant (right) is also very good.

PTDC Motel (☏ 400301; KKH; s/d Rs 1900/2450) This motel 2.5km south of town suffered some serious damage in the 2005 earthquake and has a new 110 megawatt hydro power station as a neighbour, and yet it is still one of the best riverside hotels along the KKH. The rooms facing the river are spacious, fan-cooled and spotless, and a short hop from the garden where you can have a drink and watch the fish jumping in the Indus.

Eating

PTDC Motel (KKH; mains Rs 80-125) The PTDC Motel restaurant has the usual small selection of mild curries that all the PTDCs serve.

Hotel Continental Besham (KKH; mains Rs 110-170; 🌐) The upmarket Continental has generous set menus, comfortable air-con and a few Italian dishes in addition to the ubiquitous Pakistani and Chinese cuisine.

Budget hotel restaurants such as the Hotel Paris (mains Rs 65-170) and Hotel International (mains Rs 60-100) churn out Pakistani basics like sabzi (curried vegetables), dhal and mutton curry.

Bazaar serais have inexpensive chapli kebabs, vegetables and omelettes. Fresh supplies here are the best in Kohistan. In the morning, try puri (deep-fried bread) with halwa (made from lentils, semolina or wheat with butter, sugar, milk and sweet spices).

Getting There & Away

Natco and Mashabrum Tours run several buses to Rawalpindi (Rs 280, seven hours) and Gilgit (Rs 450, nine hours) daily. Natco buses stop every few hours outside the gloomy Karachi (Al Mubarak) Hotel, but they don’t always have empty seats. Organise tickets from the office inside the hotel. Mashabrum Tours buses stop outside the Swat Hotel and tickets need to be purchased from the driver. There’s also a minibus stand for unscheduled minibuses to Gilgit (Rs 400) via Chilas (Rs 270) and other stops north. Unscheduled minibuses leave for Batagram (Rs 60) and Mansehra (Rs 120) when they are full.

For Swat, minibuses head to Mingora (Rs 100) from next to the Abasin Hotel. Change at Khwazakhela (Rs 100) for Madyan and upper Swat.

Suzukis, pick-ups and minibuses leave, when they’re full, for Pattan (Rs 55) and Dasu (Rs 90) from the Swat junction.

ALAI VALLEY

The people of the beautiful Alai Valley are Pashtuns, probably driven out of Swat in the 16th century. They had their own nawab
(Muslim ruler), and were left alone until the late 1970s, when the area came under NWFP control and the nawab was demoted to parliamentary delegate. Alai Valley is actually in the Mansehra district, not Indus Kohistan, but its only road access is from the Indus.

Though surprised to see foreigners, people are instinctively hospitable. If you respect their Sunni orthodoxy – especially by dressing modestly – you may enjoy some legendary Pashtun hospitality. Try out your Pashto, as there is little English spoken.

You get to Alai from Thakot on a road so lofty and exposed that near the top you can see about 20km of the Indus River in one sweep – reason enough to go. The valley is a bonus, lush with cornfields, terraces and orchards, and rising to pine-forested mountains. The optimal visit is probably a long day trip from Besham.

Alai is cool even in summer, so take an extra layer. From November to April it’s very cold, with snow by December.

**Orientation & Information**

The 29km Thakot to Alai road rises more than one vertical kilometre. From the end of the bus line at Karg, walk 500m back for good views of the Indus. At the east end of Karg, fork left to the main village of Banna, located across the Alai River, with a red-roofed district council resthouse, a C&W resthouse and a small hospital. Turning left past the police post (where they like you to register if you’re staying the night) and the Frontier Constabulary fort, you’ll find a jeep track that runs 30km downvalley, leading directly to Besham.

**Sights & Activities**

The road from Banna up Sherai Khwar (Sherai Valley) offers the best valley views. The right fork at Karg eventually takes you into Rupkanai Khwar, at the head of which is Sukai Peak (4689m). At the first bridge, about 4km from Karg, look up towards Biarai, which locals consider the valley’s prettiest village.

**Choaar** is a vast alpine meadow area, as big as Alai itself, a long day’s walk (one way) up either the Rupkanai or Nogram Khwars. It’s accessible only from May to August, when herds are driven up to it. You can camp there,
even trek across to the Kaghan Valley, but a local guide is essential – talk to locals.

**Sleeping & Eating**
There are two resthouses and basic teashops but no hotels. The C&W resthouse is under the jurisdiction of the executive engineer in Mansehra, but you might be able to get help from the Besham PTDC (0996-400301). Arrange meals with the *chowkidar* (caretaker) or bring your own food.

**Getting There & Away**
Occasional cargo jeeps go directly up the Alai Valley from Kund Bridge, 1.5km south of Besham, but the regular passenger service is via Thakot, 28km south of Besham (pick-up to Thakot Rs 30). Regular pick-ups and minibuses go from Thakot to Karg every hour or so (Rs 60, three hours).

**DUBAIR VALLEY**
Forty minutes and 17km north of Besham, a plume of bright blue liquid in the river is actually the clear Dubair River entering the silt-laden Indus. South of the bridge a jeep track climbs beside the stream, past terraces of corn guarded by scarecrows in Chitrali hats. Occasional passenger pick-ups go 15km up the canyon to Bar (Upper) Dubair village. A mule track reaches 20km further to the valley head, though you should definitely get local advice before going up there.

Overlooking the Dubair River in the centre of the traffic-clogged bazaar, the *Dubair Rest Point Hotel* (s/d Rs 200/250) is a very basic restaurant with a few dirty rooms. The ragged Dubair Bazaar has snacks, fruit and cold drinks.

At *Jajial*, 5km east of Dubair Valley, the KKH leaves the Indian subcontinent, geologically speaking. White-grey rocks south of Jajial belong to the subcontinent, while greenish material to the north was part of a chain of volcanic islands trapped against Asia by the drifting Indian landmass (see the boxed text, p64).

**PATTAN**
0998 / pop 121,027

Pattan (pa-taan) sits in a fertile bowl at about 900m where the Indus is joined by the Chowa Dara and Palas Rivers. It was the epicentre of a massive earthquake in 1974, in which entire sections of valley wall collapsed, burying whole villages and killing more than 7000 people.

Pattan has some of the region’s few remaining carved wooden grave markers, once common throughout Swat and Kohistan.

**Orientation & Information**
The village is well below the Highway. A link road descends from near a KKH memorial, but buses drop you almost 1km south, on a bluff above the village, from where you can short cut straight down like everyone else. The manager at the Kohistan Tourist Inn is a helpful source of information on roads, villages and people in the upper valleys.

**Sleeping & Eating**
*Kohistan Tourist Inn* (0405142; KKH; s/d Rs 1000/1200)
The best and biggest option for travellers in these parts is set on a bend of the KKH, 2km south of Pattan. The hotel has bright, clean rooms with wire-screened windows and the friendly manager is a great source of local info. There’s a (proposed) tea garden beside the churning Chowa Dara Khwar, which will be great for weary travellers. The hotel restaurant (mains Rs 50 to Rs 120) has a small vegetarian and Continental (chicken gruel!) selection along with curries and Chinese favourites.

You can get uninspiring meat and dhal from serais in Pattan bazaar. Shops have biscuits, staples and, occasionally, fruit.

**Getting There & Away**
On the KKH, passenger Suzukis and pick-ups go to Dubair or Kayal Valleys for Rs 40 and to Komila and Besham for Rs 55.
AROUND PATTAN

Before venturing into any of these side valleys, consult the manager at the Kohistan Tourist Inn (p261) and the police in Pattan, and heed their advice. Forestry resthouses at Kayal, Dubair and Palas Valleys are booked with the district forestry officer in Dasu (right). All can be reached by passenger Suzuki from Pattan.

Chowa Dara Valley
The Chowa Dara (cho-wa da-rah) Valley makes a good day hike, with channels, terraced fields and hamlets every few kilometres. A jeep road leaves the KKH north of the bus stop, and will eventually cover the 15km (and climb 1400m) to Chowa Dara village at the head of the valley.

Palas Valley
This canyon across the Indus offers strenuous hiking. About 12km up a jeep road is Sharakot village. Beyond it are the beautiful pastures of Kuz Palas (Lower Palas). Get local advice in Pattan on local protocol (few foreigners visit this side of the Indus). In any case, you should call in at Sharakot police post. There are occasional cargo jeeps from Pattan Bazaar.

Bar Palas
About 15km north on an old jeep road up the east bank of the Indus, a track turns up into the Gidar (guh-daa) Valley. It’s 20km more up to Gidar village, above which are meadows beneath a glacier at Bar Palas (Upper Palas). Cargo jeeps go from Pattan Bazaar as far as Sichoy; any further and you will need to be self-sufficient, and ideally under the protection of the authorities, the police post at Paro (about 3km before Gidar) and the tribal council.

KAYAL VALLEY

Twenty minutes north of Pattan the Highway slithers away from the Indus into a deep, narrow side canyon. At the end, south of the bridge, a jeep road climbs 7km to Kayal village. Above here the valley divides and a track up the right fork continues for 15km to pastures at 3000m. Get local advice before going very far in.

Shacks on the KKH have meat, chapati and snacks. Pick-ups pass frequently on the KKH between Pattan and Komila. Occasional passenger jeeps go to Kayal village from Pattan Bazaar.

DASU & KOMILA

Together these two villages, linked by the KKH bridge, have merged to form the biggest settlement between Besham and Chilas. Dasu, headquarters of Kohistan district, has government offices and resthouses. Komila has the bazaar and the transport.

Information
Komila has a post office. In Dasu, 300m north of the bridge, are the police, district commissioner, Frontier Constabulary and C&W executive engineer; you can book resthouses here and at Pattan and Besham. The district forestry office, where you can book regional forestry resthouses, is also in Dasu.

Sleeping & Eating
Khyber Lodge Hotel (047102; s/d Rs 400/700) The best accommodation in Dasu, although that isn’t saying much. Dodgy wiring and plumbing and diabolical stairways hint at ‘works in progress’ but there’s little evidence of progress. However, the management is friendly and a good source of information and the views of the Indus are magnificent. The better rooms with soap and towel and running hot water are found upstairs. There’s a decent restaurant (mains Rs 65 to Rs 120) with a Pakistani menu as well as pakoras and potato chips for snacks.

Other options include the Green Hills Hotel (047032; d Rs 350) in Komila and Indus Waves Hotel (Dasu; s/d Rs 180/200), with basic rooms and shared toilet. The basic meat and chapati truck stops aren’t eager for foreign guests.

Getting There & Away
Some northbound and southbound Natco buses stop at the bright Natco Hotel in Dasu for a food stop. If there are seats available you can buy a ticket from the driver. Catch regional transport in upper Komila bazaar. Long-distance buses and minibuses use a dirty space downhill and closer to the bridge in Komila and may also stop at the petrol station or Indus Waves Hotel in Dasu. Minibuses are Rs 55 to Pattan and Rs 90 to Besham. For Chilas, you may need to change at Shatial (Rs 50).

DASU TO SHATIAL

In several places north of Dasu the road is just a notch in a sheer granite face, hundreds of metres above the silty Indus. This stretch
of road took a full year to carve out and cost more lives per kilometre to build than any other part of the KKH. It was originally planned for the broad slopes across the river, but ferocious local resistance to the loss of arable land led to the road’s realignment. It’s a rocky cauldron of unforgiving heat in summer. What’s most extraordinary is the number of logs lying beside the road. These logs are sold on the Highway and are sourced from unseen forests high above the Indus and the KKH.

At Barsin, 12km north of Dasu, a very lonely four-room PTDC Motel (s/d Rs 1800/2200) is like a fort in the frontier. And that is exactly what it is – a refuge for travellers caught by a sinking sun. Travel in these parts after sundown is not recommended. The rooms are recently repainted and clean, and simple meals can be provided in the restaurant. A phone is coming (apparently), but for now, management suggest booking through the Khyber Lodge Hotel (0987-407102) in Dasu.

A further 10km north is the confluence with the 80km-long Kandia Valley, a major Indus tributary and, until the 19th century, an independent ministate. Ten minutes on, the Indus turns east, its dark gorge abruptly opens out and soon the NA reaches down to the northern riverbank – though the Highway remains in NWFP for a further 40km or so.

At Sumer Nala, about 23km north of the Kandia Valley bridge, you can find basic charpoy hotels at a popular truck stop, though neither Sumer Nala or Shatial are recommended places to stop.

SHATIAL
From the road, Shatial is an ad hoc collection of serais, minibuses and swarms of idle men (looking for casual work). Check out the petroglyphs below the bazaar, near the Indus bridge (to Darel). They include a detailed Buddhist tableau and many inscriptions and travellers’ names, pecked into the rocks from the 1st century AD onwards. (There is more of this extraordinary ancient graffiti along the road from here to Chilas.)

Sleeping
Shatial Bazaar has an ultra-basic serai with charpoys. For cyclists, Dasu to Chilas is the longest stretch (about 125km) of the KKH without reliable or recommended accommodation.

Getting There & Away
Minibuses go upriver to Chilas (about Rs 70, 1½ hours), and downriver to Besham (Rs 125, five to six hours), all day. This is also the transfer point for the Darel and Tangir Valleys (below).

GILGIT REGION
This section begins in the southernmost unit of the NA, Diamir district. It’s best known for the 8125m massif of Nanga Parbat, the eighth-highest mountain in the world (Diamir is its local name). It also includes the remote Astor Valley, running along the east side of Nanga Parbat to the Indus, and 100km of the Indus Valley from there to the NWFP line, taking in some of Pakistan’s harshest terrain and most ungovernable peoples.

Gilgit Town is the administrative headquarters for the NA and a major hub of the KKH. This bustling town offers information, transport, friendly hotels and good restaurants. The town is an interesting melting pot of northern peoples, and there are historical spots and good walks within day-trip distance.

Surrounding Gilgit are some beautiful valleys: Haramosh on the Indus, Bagrot just downriver, Naltar to the north, and the upper Gilgit River system – comprising Punial and the tributaries of Ishkoman, Yasin and Ghizar, the last stretching west to the Shandur Pass into Chitral. The lower reaches of these valleys are austere and brown, though poplars and orchards brighten them in spring and autumn. But the higher you go the better it looks; many glacier-fed nalas (Urdu for tributary canyons) above 2000m harbour pine and juniper forests and luxuriant meadows.

DAREL & TANGIR
Two of the old unruly valley states that have stayed unruly are Darel (da-rel) and Tangir (taan-geer), which meet the Indus across from Shatial. They voluntarily joined Pakistan only in 1952, and even today have the NA’s worst reputation for lawlessness. ‘Administration’ from Chilas mostly means police garrisons to keep the customary blood feud from boiling over.

Reports of gun battles between locals and police are common, as are travellers’ stories of theft and even rape. It’s hard to separate fact from fiction, but this clearly isn’t a very safe
place to visit, and outsiders aren’t warmly welcomed. It’s a pity, because the valleys are said to be rich in natural beauty and archaeological remains. Darel was the site of some important Buddhist monasteries.

You can hire a pick-up at Shatial or a jeep at Chilas, though your first stop should be the assistant commissioner or the chief of police at Tangir or Gumari. Both are about 20km from Shatial.

SHATIAL TO CHILAS

Along the road, look for cave-dwelling shepherds who move down to the river for the vital water. Foreigners will need to register at the Chilas district boundary, 43km before Chilas, near where work has begun on Basha Dam. This controversial dam will submerge many petroglyphs that Unesco has identified as having great artistic and historical value. Ten minutes onwards the Highway crosses from NWFP into the NA, passing a line drawn on a map by Sir Cyril Radcliffe in the feverish fortnight before Partition in 1947. This was the intended border between Pakistan and India, disarranged by an uprising in Gilgit (see the boxed text, p275).

Just 17km from the previous checkpoint, foreigners need to register again at another checkpoint. Eight kilometres further is Thor (pronounced ‘tore’), a green oasis in the arid valley. Below the bridge over Thor Gah are some rock inscriptions. Twenty minutes on, across the river, the remains of a 1000-year-old fort are on a ridge to the right of a ravine called Hodur Gah. The rocks below the fort are covered with old inscriptions.

West of Chilas the Indus is flat and meandering. On the south side, the Lesser Himalaya stretches 80km towards Punjab. On the north side are the Hindu Raj, the eastern arm of the Hindukush. From Hodur, 20 minutes west of Chilas, take your first look at Nanga Parbat.

CHILAS

Most visitors are here to look at the petroglyphs or to cross the Babusar Pass (see p255). There are few other reasons to stop. Foreign women especially may feel unwelcome.

Even after Kashmiri-British rule was imposed a century ago, the Indus Valley west of Chilas was a hornet’s nest of tiny republics; there was one in almost every side valley, each loosely guided by a jirga (council of tribal elders) but effectively leaderless, all at war with one another and feuding internally. Though administratively lumped with Gilgit, Chilas and its neighbours are temperamentally more like Indus Kohistan, probably owing to a similarly hostile environment and the same Sunni Muslim orthodoxy (their ancestors were forcibly converted centuries ago by Pashtun crusaders, whereas hardly anyone north of Gilgit is Sunni).

The large Chilas Fort was first garrisoned to protect British supply lines over the Babusar Pass, and befeated up after local tribes nearly overran it in 1893. Now a police post, it has put a lid on Chilas, though not on the Darel and Tangir Valleys to the west.

Chilasis are Shina speakers, with some Pashtun settlers speaking Pashto. Urdu and some English are also spoken.

Information

On the road to the bazaar is the NAPWD executive engineer, where district resthouses can be booked. The post office is opposite the fort, which houses the police post. A district hospital is at the bottom of Hospital Rd.

Sights & Activities

Local police are usually happy to show guests around the fort, where they are stationed. Your hotel manager may be able to help organise this. The interesting stone-filled wooden battlements with gun sights are crumbling away and the blackened kitchen looks as if it’s been in use since 1893.

Chilas is surrounded by wonderful petroglyphs, which are easy to access, though be prepared for high temperatures and take plenty of water (see the boxed text, p267).

Sleeping & Eating

On the KKH (and nearest the petroglyphs) are several midrange tourist hotels with hot
The air-cooled rooms at the Karakurum Inn are clean and spacious, and the restaurant (breakfast Rs 120, lunch Rs 225 and dinner Rs 280) has generous set meals of local and Continental dishes.

**Diamond Peak** *(s/d Rs 150/200)* Probably the best of the very basic hotels in the bazaar.

The **NAPWD resthouse** *(d Rs 300)* is good, but very popular in summer. Other NAPWD resthouses are east of Chilas at Jalipur, Gonar Farm and Gini (off the Highway), and there’s a primitive resthouse at Babusar village on the Kaghan Valley road, the only one that closes in winter. All can be booked in Chilas with the executive engineer.

**Karakurum Inn** *( 50511; KKH; d/s/d Rs 100/600/700)* The friendly staff here are happy to help foreigners visit the petroglyph sites and Chilas village. While local assistance or advice may not be necessary, it is certainly recommended. The air-cooled rooms at the Karakurum Inn are basic and the bedding dirty.

**Hotel Chilas Inn** *( 50510; KKH; d standard/deluxe Rs 45 to Rs 60)* produces inexpensive dhal, chicken and mutton curries and chapatis.

**Grace Continental Hotel & Restaurant** *( 50516; KKH; s/d Rs 800/1200)* The staff here is very helpful and informative and there’s a gift shop in the foyer. The rooms of this recommended hotel are air-cooled and there’s a nice surprise in the bathrooms – a bathtub. There’s a good restaurant (mains Rs 45 to Rs 60) produces inexpensive dhal, chicken and mutton curries and chapatis.
screened verandas and a river view. The VIP rooms have attractive mock-traditional décor of mud walls, double beds and a tub in the bathroom, and are definitely the best rooms in Chilas. All rooms are air-cooled. The recommended restaurant (mains from Rs 150) has Pakistani, Chinese and Continental cuisine.

Panorama Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 50664; KKH; s/d Rs 1600/1800, s/d deluxe Rs 1500/2000) The Panorama’s aspect over the valley is very pleasing and the wide, wire-screened verandas are comfortable vantage points. All rooms are air-cooled, and the 10 deluxe rooms have tubs in the bathroom. There is a good restaurant (mains Rs 70 to Rs 125) with numerous fried rice dishes such as the tasty beef chilli fried rice for Rs 70.

Getting There & Away
Minibuses (Rs 130) run every few hours between the bus yard and Gilgit’s general bus stand. A minibus to Shatial is Rs 70. Local pick-ups will take you from the Chilas bus yard to the KKH for a few rupees, or on to Hodur, Thor or Shatial. Through buses to Rawalpindi pass about four hours after departing Gilgit.

BABUSAR PASS & KAGHAN VALLEY
A Natco vehicle leaves from near the post office early each morning (in summer only) and goes up to Babusar village along the upgraded road through Thak Nala. You might be able to hire a jeep to Naran (in the Kaghan Valley) from the bus yard, but a surer way is to hire one in Gilgit. For information about the Babusar Pass, see p255.

CHILAS TO GILGIT
About 12km beyond Chilas a cavalcade of liveried trucks and rambling teashops signals the popular truck stop of Gini. A further 13km and the Highway passes through Bunar Das, an oasis of green fields and fruit trees hemmed in by stone walls. The village is situated on a plateau below the Bunar Gah, the main access to Nanga Parbat’s western (Diamir) face. After Bunar Das the Highway bisects the small settlements of Gonar Farm and Jalipur before reaching the notorious ‘sliding area’ of Tatta Pani, 6km before Raikot Bridge.

The Highway crosses the Indus on Raikot Bridge, just over an hour (55km) east of Chilas. From the south side of the bridge a private road has been driven up the mountainside towards the pristine alpine plateau called Fairy Meadow, with heart-stopping views up Nanga Parbat’s north side, and north to Rakaposhi peak.

The road was built with logging in mind, but subsequent plans for a resort at the meadows (the Shangrila Motel by the bridge was to be a ‘holding pen’ for resort guests) got some backs up. Local people, through whose land the road runs, offer jeep transport to Fairy Point (one way/return Rs 1500/3000) – the end of the road. For more on trekking in this area, see p348.

Five minutes north of the bridge, the small Liachar Nala enters the Indus. In 1841...

THE PETROGLYPHS AT CHILAS
The ancient routes through the Karakoram are dotted with places where travellers pecked graffiti into the sun-varnished rocks: names, pictures or prayers for safe passage, merit in the afterlife or good luck on the next hunting trip. The desolation around Chilas must have moved many to special fervour, and several sites by the Highway are rich with these inscriptions.

There is a sign to the ‘Chilas II’ site near the KKH police checkpoint. Less than 1km down a jeep track there is a huge rock covered with hunting and battle scenes and Buddhist stupas. A common image is the long-horned ibex, ancient symbol of fertility and abundance, and an elusive trophy animal even now. On a rocky knoll facing the river are the oldest inscriptions, from the 1st century AD: scenes of conquest and stories of the Buddha’s life.

Four kilometres east beside the jeep bridge to Thalpan is the ‘Chilas I’ site, with art found on both sides of the Highway and the river. The most striking pictures are of a large stupa with banners flying, close to the Highway; and mythical animals, battle scenes, royal lineages and Buddhist tales, across the river on dozens of rocks west of the track.

Details of these and other sites are in two books you might find in an Islamabad bookshop: Dr AH Dani’s Human Records on Karakoram Highway and Dr Karl Jettmar’s Rockcarvings & Inscriptions in the Northern Areas of Pakistan.
an earthquake caused an entire valley wall to collapse into the Indus here, damming it up. When the dam broke, a wall of water roared down the canyon, washing away scores of villages and drowning thousands, including an entire Sikh army battalion camped at Attock, almost 500km downstream.

Midway between Chilas and Gilgit (1½ hours from each) and 2km south of the village of Talechi (ta-li-chee), is the turn-off to Astor Valley. The area around Talechi has the best views of the largest number of snowy peaks anywhere on the KKH. From the north, the prominent ones are Rakaposhi (7788m; a sharp point above a broad white base), Dobani (6134m; a blunt pyramid), Haramosh (7409m; a series of glaciated ridges) and Nanga Parbat (8125m).

Thirteen kilometres north of Talechi is the old bridge and road to Astor Valley via Bunji, once the Maharaja of Kashmir’s local garrison, now headquarters of the Northern Light Infantry (NLI). A further 4km brings you to Jaglot (juh-glote) bazaar and after another 5km there is a whitewashed monument signalling the junction of the Indus and Hunza Rivers, and so the meeting point of the Karakoram, Hindukush and Himalayan Ranges. Another 4km further on (an hour south of Gilgit), the Skardu road leaves the KKH.

Sleeping & Eating
At Raikot Bridge is the Shangrila Motel (s/d Rs 1500/1800), an expensive option that is theoretically open from June through to mid-October. Do not rely on it being open, though; ring the Shangrila Indus View (☎ 05812-50539) in Chilas. An alternative is 15km north at the beautifully sited NAPWD resthouse (d Rs 300) in Talechi. It can be booked through the executive engineer in Chilas or the chief engineer (☎ 05811-50307) in Gilgit. There are several shabby inns at Jaglot.

ASTOR VALLEY & NANGA PARBAT
The Nanga Parbat massif is the western anchor of the Great Himalaya. Its south (Rupal) face is a sheer 4500m wall, too steep for snow to stick – hence its name, Urdu for ‘Naked Mountain’. The north (Raikot) face steps down 7000m to the Indus. A large number of climbers have been killed trying to scale this mountain.

The hair-raising track beside it, up the Astor Valley and over the Burzil Pass, was the only link between British India and Gilgit until the Babusar Pass was opened in 1892. The India–Pakistan Line of Control has closed the Burzil, but Astor is still the best way to get up close to the mountain. Four-wheel drives regularly fell off the track until it was improved. It’s now wider and safer, but probably no more comfortable.

Astor Valley is about 75% Sunni and 25% Shiite, the latter mainly in the upper tributaries. Everyone speaks Shina and almost nobody speaks English. Some food is available in Astor, but if you’re going further or camping it’s a good idea to bring some supplies.

Talechi to Astor Village
The road from Talechi near the mouth of the valley starts off impressively but is soon squeezed onto the crumbling sides of the barren, slide-prone gorge. It’s an oven in summer, but grows lovelier as you climb. There’s a foreigner registration point 13km in at Doian, not long after which the road traverses a dangerous slipping area.

At 2450m Astor village is perched like an eagle’s nest on both sides of Rama Gah (ra-vine). The bazaar is up a steep track on the north side of the ravine, and the valley road continues on the south side. The police ask foreigners to register on arrival; the station is in the bazaar. Above the bazaar is the NAPWD executive engineer, where you can book valley resthouses. A post office is across the ravine, near the polo ground.

SLEEPING & EATING
Dreamland Tourist Inn (s/d Rs 200/300) At the top of the main bazaar, this place has a decent local restaurant and bathrooms with cold shower. There’s also a small garden.

Kamran Hotel (☎ 05817-51111; s/d Rs 400/600) A few metres down the hill from Dreamland, the Kamran is slightly more upmarket with small though comfortable rooms with morning hot water. The Kamran is your best bet for finding a room either side of the peak summer season. The restaurant (mains Rs 40 to Rs 80) does well with the limited supplies available up here.

On the south side of Rama Gah is an NAPWD resthouse (d Rs 300), which can be booked with the executive engineer here or the chief engineer (☎ 05811-50307) in Gilgit.

Rama Lake
Above Astor village is the steep and very beautiful Rama Gah, with scattered hamlets and
thick pine and birch forest. A steep track starts from Astor bazaar. In a big meadow two to 2½ hours up, take the left-hand track and walk for an hour past the treeline to Rama Lake. It’s about 1km higher than Astor village, and is considerably cooler in all seasons. From here you can see Rama Ridge, a minor shoulder of Nanga Parbat, and the Sachen Glacier (not to be confused with the Siachen Glacier in the High Karakoram).

SLEEPING & EATING
There is excellent camping at the meadow and at the lake. At the meadow there’s a modest NAPWD resthouse (d Rs 300), which can be booked through the executive engineer in Astor or the chief engineer (05811-50307) in Gilgit. Also here is a large and incongruous PTDC Motel (s/d Rs 1200/1500) with the expected comfortable rooms and hot water. Check with the PTDC (05811-54262; c/o PTDC Chinar Inn, Babar Rd) in Gilgit to confirm when it is open.

Upper Astor Valley
The upper valley is a worthy destination in its own right and also works well as a side trip to Deosai Plains jeep safaris. Good walks start from upvalley villages including Gurikot (9km beyond Astor), Rampur and Tarashing. A track towards the Deosai Plains (p291) goes up Chilim Gah, just above Gurikot.

The track to Britain’s old Burzil Pass route to Kashmir branches south up Ratu Gah, about 15km from Gurikot (Ratu Gah...
NANGA PARBAT

An unmistakable feature of the region is massive Nanga Parbat, 8125m high and rising by 7mm every year, faster than almost any other part of the Himalaya chain. The sharpest elevation differences found anywhere on earth are here: almost seven vertical kilometres from the summit into the adjacent Indus gorge, and the mountain’s sheer, unbroken 4000m south wall (the Rupal face).

Nanga Parbat sits atop a mass of ancient Indian Plate rocks, sticking oddly northwards into the volcanic-island material of the Kohistan Complex. Its unusual position and growth are still matters of active research; explanations involve the dynamics of the entire Himalayan system.

At Liachar Valley, about 4km upstream from the Raikot Bridge over the Indus (between Gilgit and Chilas), across from the KKH, you can see the grey pre-Cambrian granite of the Indian Plate, hundreds of millions of years old, pushed over on top of river sediments less than 100,000 years old. This reversal is part of the continuing disruption as Nanga Parbat rises.

approaches the Line of Control and is therefore off limits).

Tarashing is about 40km from Astor and 2911m high, beneath Nanga Parbat’s naked Rupal face (though it’s not in full view). The village sits in a spectacular piece of real estate amid massive glaciers flowing from the mountain massif. From here you can day-hike up the moraine (glacial rubble) for a good look at the Rupal face, the Tarashing Glacier, across the glacier and on up Rupal Gah, or across Rupal Gah to Zaipur village, at the top of which are water channels on huge wooden towers said to be 400 to 500 years old. It is important to note that local police regulations currently do not allow unaccompanied foreigners to venture beyond Tarashing (for their own safety).

Beyond Tarashing the Rupal Valley is dominated by Nanga Parbat’s Rupal face that sweeps 4572m upwards in the world’s greatest vertical rise from a base camp to a summit. Staggeringly close-up views of Nanga Parbat are possible from several vantage points in the valley. A recently constructed road extends beyond Tarashing and Rupal village to within less than an hour’s easy walk of its base camp, Herrligkoffer Base Camp (3550m), a beautiful meadow with a large spring along the Bazhin Glacier. It’s named for Dr Karl M Herrligkoffer, the leader of eight German expeditions to Nanga Parbat, including the first successful expedition in 1953.

From the base camp, you can go on a half-day walk across the Bazhin Glacier to Latobah (3530m), the broad, level meadow frequented by Rupal shepherds directly beneath the main summit. An overnight trek goes further upvalley to Shaigiri (3655m), an idyllic summer pasture with an awesome view of Nanga Parbat’s south face. It is also the starting point for a longer, technical trek across Mazeno La.

Lonely Planet’s Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush has further details on these and other treks around Nanga Parbat.

SLEEPING & EATING

Tarashing is the only village in the valley with accommodation, although new hotels are planned for Rupal village and the road’s end.

Hotel Nanga Parbat (Tarashing; camping Rs 100, r downstairs/upstairs Rs 400/500) Has a big garden and rooms with shared bathroom and cold shower.

Rupal Hotel (Tarashing; camping Rs 100, r downstairs/ upstairs Rs 400/500) The similar Rupal has a walled compound in which to pitch a tent.

Getting There & Away

Natco has a daily bus to Astor (Rs 130), departing from Gilgit’s general bus stand. A Natco bus also leaves Astor for Rawalpindi (Rs 700, 16 hours) at 11am. Other minibuses bound for Astor (Rs 130) infrequently leave from near the Diamir Hotel in Gilgit. Astor is four to five hours from Gilgit.

You can hire a jeep in Astor for the round trip to Rama Lake for about Rs 1200. Cargo and passenger jeeps run daily from Astor to Tarashing (Rs 60, 1½ hours), departing sporadically from no particular place in the bazaar – ask around and you will be shown. Tarashing–Astor vehicles depart daily between 6.30am and 7am. The road is only metallled halfway from Astor to the junction with the road across the Deosai Plains.
HARAMOSH VALLEY
Thirty-eight kilometres south of Gilgit, the Skardu Rd leaves the KKH and joins the Indus. The Haramosh Valley circles around 7409m Haramosh, descending to the road just where the Indus gorge turns south to skirt this massif, near the village of Sassi.

The Shina-speaking people in the valley are unused to foreigners and haven’t much to offer visitors. There’s no food or lodging, but alpine meadows and the glaciers at the feet of Haramosh and other giants await trekkers; see Lonely Planet’s *Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush* for details on these and other treks.

There is no recommended accommodation beyond the Highway. Sassi has several seedy roadhouses and Skardu-bound minibuses and buses may stop there.

BAGROT VALLEY
Fifteen kilometres downriver from Gilgit, a broad alluvial fan marks the Bagrot (ba-grote) Valley. Its lower reaches are like a marbled moonscape, and a ride up the narrow, perched road is unforgettable. The upper valley is huge, rugged and densely cultivated. The Shina-speaking, Shiite Bagrotis see few foreigners other than passing trekkers.

Oshikandas is a mainly Ismaili village on the road from Gilgit. Across the river is *Jalalabad*. Bagrot’s main village is *Sinakkar*, two hours from Gilgit. At the end of the jeep road, 1½ hours on, is the last year-round village, *Chirah*,
with a view of Hinarche Glacier and a series of ridges culminating in Diran Peak (7270m). Nagyr is on the other side. The prominent peak to the southeast is 6134m Dobani.

From Chirah there’s a spectacular trek up to Diran Base Camp (see p346). In another direction, four to five hours’ walking will bring you to Dar, and the same distance on again is Gargoh. These are seasonal villages where a large part of the valley’s population migrates with their goats and sheep each summer. Hikers (some trekkers, but day hikers too) go as far as Gargoh (ie a day east of Chirah) but not across Rakhan Gali. Lonely Planet’s Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush has further details on this and other treks.

Sleeping
Perched on a ledge up above Chirah, with postcard-perfect views of Diran and the Hinarche Glacier, the basic Bagrote Sarai (camping Rs 100, r Rs 500) is literally at the end of the road. There’s a panoramic dining hall in which to unwind, and above it the simple rooms are arranged on terraces (you can lie in bed and look out at the mountains). The bathrooms are in a separate building and there are more terraces above the rooms where you can pitch a tent.

Getting There & Away
From Garhi Bagh in Gilgit, cargo jeeps go in the early morning to Chirah via Dainyor in under an hour. A better bet is to go by Suzuki to Dainyor, where you can pick up a ‘special’ taxi to Chirah (Rs 70). Avoid jeeps to Sinakkar, which isn’t far enough. Travel Walji’s ( 05811-52665; www.waljis.com; Airport Rd) in Gilgit organises overnight trips and local hikes. Expect to pay Rs 2500 for the jeep and driver.

GILGIT TOWN
  05811 / elevation 1500m
Gilgit’s dusty bazaar is not particularly colourful but it’s lively and eclectic, filled with people drawn from Karachi to Kashgar. It’s not unusual to hear Uyghur, Wakhi, Burushaski, Khowar and Pashto; Urdu and English are also widely spoken.

The town wakes early to muezzins in scores of mosques calling the faithful to dawn prayers. The major Muslim branches – Shiite, Sunni and Ismaili – overlap here, with sectarian tensions just under the surface. In 1988 Sunni–Shiite hostility exploded into virtual warfare at Jalalabad in Bagrot. Sectarian battles erupted around Gilgit during 1992 to 1994 and, after a long period of relative calm, again in 2005. Since then, the overwhelming presence of heavily armed police and army has become everyday normality, though it can be quite a shock for visitors.

Gilgit is becoming a city, its headlong growth owing more to its position on modern trade routes to China and Central Asia than to tourism. There is always talk (but little action) of extending the airport runway to allow jets to land, but basic public services such as electricity and water haven’t kept pace with the town’s growth.

Orientation
The town is beside the Gilgit River, 10km west of the KKH. A back road also comes from the KKH at Dainyor via bridges over the Hunza and Gilgit Rivers, saving 10km for those coming from the north.

The bazaar is essentially a 2km street full of shops. Shopkeepers from nearby areas cluster together; eg in Khazana (Bank) Rd for Nagyr and in Jamaat Khana Bazaar for Hunza. Southwest up Khazana Rd are government offices; further up are several villages, the biggest of which is Barmas. The airport is east of the main bazaar. Southeast is the military cantonment of Jutial.

Some roads have two names, one common and one official: eg Jamaat Khana Bazaar (Sir Aga Khan Rd), Bank Rd (Khazana Rd) and Hospital Rd (Allama Iqbal Rd) – official names are in parentheses.

Information
BOOKSHOPS
Gilgit Serena Hotel ( 05811-52665; www.waljis.com; Airport Rd) in Gilgit organises overnight trips and local hikes. Expect to pay Rs 2500 for the jeep and driver.

FOREIGNERS’ REGISTRATION
Foreigners’ Registration Office (FRO; Yadgar Chowk; 8am-3pm Mon-Thu & Sat, 8am-noon Fri Apr-Sep, 9am-3.30pm Mon-Thu & Sat, 9am-noon Fri Oct-Mar) Authorities in Gilgit are still requesting registration for travellers staying for more than 15 days in the NA – despite
national abolition of the 30-day foreigner registration rule. You need two passport photos and a photocopy of your visa and passport.

INTERNET ACCESS
Popular backpacker hotels such as the Madina and Horizon, as well as the upmarket Serena, have good internet services.

Comsats (Khazana Rd; per hr Rs 40) At ISP Comsats’ office you will find the fastest and most comfortable internet café in Gilgit (apart from the hotels mentioned above).

Ideal Net Cafe (Airport Rd; per hr Rs 40) A tight squeeze and a bit unsavoury.

LIBRARY

Gilgit Municipal Library (9am-2pm Sun-Thu, 8am-noon Fri) Off upper Khazana Rd, in the renovated home of the early British political agents. Many of its 20,000 volumes are in English and the reading room has some international magazines.

MEDICAL SERVICES
Gilgit has a district hospital (upper Hospital Rd) and, nearby, a Women’s Hospital with female doctors. Foreign women can go to either, though the former has more specialists. The internationally staffed, privately funded Vision International Eye Hospital (55778; www.gilgiteyehospital.org; River View Rd), 2km east of the twin suspension Jinnah Bridges, confirms that in emergencies they can help travellers with non-eye problems. The hospital relies on (and welcomes) private donations.

MONEY

Alam & Co Money Exchange (417 NLI Chowk; 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Better cash rates than the banks. Accepts most major currencies.

Bank Alfalah (Heli Chowk) Has an ATM that accepts international Visa (only) cards (when it is working!).

National Bank (Khazana Rd; 9am-1.30pm Mon-Thu, 9am-12.30pm Fri & Sat) Efficient and friendly foreign exchange, accepting US and Canadian dollars, UK pounds, euros and travellers cheques. At the time of research finishing touches were being put on the new branch near NLI Chowk.

Soneri Bank (Saddar Bazaar; 9am-1.30pm & 3-5pm Mon-Thu, 9am-12.30pm Fri & Sat) Note extended afternoon hours for foreign exchange. Travellers cheques attract Rs 50 commission.

POST

Post office (Saddar Bazaar; 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) Poste restante is down the path along the right-hand side facing the main office.

TELEPHONE
You can make overseas calls from the government PCO next to the Askari Bakery in Jutial, and from the main exchange in upper Hospital Rd. Both are open 24 hours. The government PCO charges up to 30% less than the numerous private PCOs.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Gilgit Conservation & Information Centre (55658; NLI Colony, Jutial) The regional office for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), 200m west of the general bus stand, has a comfortable library with bird, plant and mammal guides, as well as some general texts on the region. Brochures on regional conservation programmes.

NAPWD Chief Engineer (50307; Khazana Rd) Book resthouses between Chilas and the Khunjerab Pass here.

PTDC (54262; c/o PTDC Chinar Inn, Babar Rd) Has a few brochures and can help with bookings and tours, but that’s about it.

TRAVEL AGENCIES
Gilgit has a number of travel and trekking agencies, including the following reliable ones:

Golden Peak Tours (55726; www.goldenpeaktours.com.pk; Shahrah-e-Quaid-e-Azam Rd, Khomer Chowk)

Lost Horizon Treks & Tours (55288; www.losthorizontreks.com; Horizon Guesthouse, Shahrah-e-Quaid-e-Azam Rd) Goes anywhere but Astor Valley is a speciality.

Madina Guides (53536; www.madinaguides.com; Madina Hotel & Guest House, NLI Chowk)

Travel Walji’s (52665; www.waljis.com; Airport Rd) Highly reputable company with reliable jeeps and drivers.

VISA EXTENSION

Deputy Commissioner’s Office (DCO; Shahrah-e-Quaid-e-Azam Rd; 9am-1pm Mon-Fri) Thirty-day extensions are provided to most nationalities — cost depends on nationality but they’re often provided free of charge.

Sights & Activities

GOHAR AMAN’S TOWER
In the grounds of the Army Public School (Hayat Shaheed), a crumbling adobe tower is all that remains of a fort built by Gohar Aman in the 1850s. There’s not much to look at and the school is pretty security conscious. The school principal may be happy to escort you to the tower and provide a potted history.

BRITISH CEMETERY
The well-kept British Cemetery (Lower Khazana Rd; 9am-8pm May-Oct, 10am-6pm Nov-Apr) has some surprisingly recent graves of adventurous trekkers
and mountaineers among the more historical plots. Buried here is Captain George Hayward, a British explorer murdered in Yasin in 1870 by a son of Gohar Aman. On the side of the shack inside the grounds you’ll find a useful map with some interesting stories from the grave. If Ghulam Ali, the caretaker, is around you’ll be shown more interesting items for a small donation to the cemetery’s upkeep.

UPRISING MEMORIAL
By Chinar Bagh, the municipal park, is a memorial to those who rose against the Maharaja in 1947. It includes the graves of the local heroes, Mohammed Babar Khan and Safiullah Beg of the Gilgit Scouts, and Mirza Hassan Khan of the Kashmir Infantry. See the boxed text, above.

POLO
In late October the action starts to hot up as teams vie for the chance to compete in the prestigious Shandur cup. Enter the ground via the gates on Raja Bazaar; admission is apparently free. The horsemanship is first rate, the recklessness competitiveness of the riders is entertaining and the treatment of the horses is...well, these must be tough little ponies. See the boxed text, p276.

HORSE TREKKING
Walk & Ride Pakistan (052205; www.walkandridepakistan.com; Huma Plaza, Domyal Link Rd) organises horse treks from Phander to the Shandur Pass for the polo tournament, as well as through the Chapursan Valley in Gojal.

FISHING
The office of the Deputy Director Fisheries Northern Areas (053277; Khazana Rd) issues a foreigners’ fishing licence (US$10/30/160 per day/week/month). Don’t bother with the archaic fishing gear available for hire – bring your own.

Sleeping
BUDGET
In this range, most rooms have bathrooms with hot water running in the morning and possibly the evening. Many also have gardens where you can pitch a tent.

Top Moon Hotel (053828; Airport Rd; s/d Rs 150/200) The manager will probably be quite surprised if you take one of his shabby, easy-on-the-pocket rooms. All have bathrooms, but the hot water plumbing is unreliable. A desperate choice only.

Golden Peak Hotel & Restaurant (054839; Khazana Rd; dm/s Rs 100/150, d Rs 200-300) The ramshackle...
THE GAME OF KINGS

Polo is the most popular sport in the NA and Chitral, eclipsing even cricket as a topic of conversation and as a crowd-puller. It's thought to have originated as a form of military training for elite royal troops – probably in Persia, although many locals will tell you it started in the NA (polo is Balti for ‘ball’). Teams may number up to 100 – virtual armies.

It certainly didn’t come cheap; major costs like the upkeep of ponies could eat up a sizable part of a mir’s (the region’s traditional ruler) annual budget. Today most tournaments are government-supported.

The modern rules are relatively simple. Each team has six players. One of them begins the game by taking a ball and stick in one hand and galloping up the field towards the other team like a man possessed. At the halfway line he throws the ball up and, with a bit of skill, hits it far towards the opposition’s goal. Horses foam at the bit, sticks clash together and players hang off their mounts to get into the best position to smack the ball. Whenever play nears the sidelines, spectators flee for their lives as balls and mallets fly through the air. The aim is of course to score a goal, whereupon a band of drummers and pipers goes mad, and the teams change ends.

Traditionally the game continues until one team has scored nine goals, but nowadays an hour’s play with a 10- or 15-minute halftime break is the norm. If a horse or player is injured and forced to retire, his opposite number must also leave the game.

Northern polo ponies are beautiful animals with astonishing stamina (there are no horse changes), but mountain polo can be a cruel game. Horses are routinely hit or cut by balls moving at blinding speed, or by mallets. Apparently several horses drop dead of heart failure every season, in the middle of games.

Following is a list of the best places and times to catch a game:
- Gilgit, from April to early May and in October and November, especially the Uprising Day tournament in the first week of November.
- Skardu, especially the Pakistan Independence Day tournament in the second week of August.
- Chitral, in late May or during the district tournament in mid-September.
- Shandur Pass, the world’s highest polo ground, during the Chitral versus Gilgit tournament each July. This dates from 1936, and has been an annual, heavily toured event since 1989. Most sizable travel agencies in Gilgit and Chitral and a number of national agencies now have package tours, and their own Shandur encampments, for the event.

Golden Peak occupies the garden and old summer house of the mir (traditional ruler) of Nagyr. Unfortunately, the rooms in the old wing are too dark, damp and dingy to offer a historically interesting nap. The bare ‘new’ rooms are only marginally better.

New Tourist Cottage (54255; Chinar Bagh Link Rd; camping Rs 50, dm/s/d Rs 100/170/250) As well as the cheap rates, one of the best aspects of this place is the tranquil overgrown garden. The rooms here are basic affairs with huge bathrooms with reliable hot water. All are kept clean. No longer Japanese run, the new manager, Israr, plans to keep the Japanese menu and library, and has promised to replace the very steep stairs that some guests find challenging.

JSR Hotel (52308; JSR Plaza; s/d Rs 200/300) The unadorned JSR is not the worst budget choice, with basic and bearably grungy rooms and a smile at reception. But that’s about as much as can be said for it.

Madina Hotel & Guest House (53536; www.madinaguides.com; NLI Chowk; dm/d without bathroom Rs 130/240, d Rs 340; ) With the perennially obliging Yaqoob managing it, the Madina remains the international travellers’ favourite. Rooms vary but all are kept spotless. There’s a basic restaurant dishing up a few traveller favourites, and invaluable assistance with onward transport, tours, trekking, visa extensions etc is generously provided. This is the home of the Madina Guides trekking and tour operation (see p274).

North Inn (55545; Khomrer Chowk; s/d Rs 250/350) Travellers once gave high marks to the North Inn, but lack of patronage has seen standards
This welcoming hotel is agreeable located down by the river in its own private and peaceful compound. There’s a standard PTDC restaurant, of course, and a basic information and travel desk.

**Rupal Inn** (55471; Shahrah-e-Qauid-e-Azam Rd; s/d Rs 1400/2000, deluxe Rs 1800/2550) This large 48-room hotel is clearly designed for tour groups and makes for an exceptionally comfortable stay – all the better if you negotiate a discount. There’s a pleasant garden for barbecues as well as a multicuisine restaurant and coffee shop. The carpeted, very spacious rooms come with TVs and bathtubs and are the roomiest in Gilgit.

**Canopy Nexus** (51011; www.canopynexus.com; River View Rd; d Rs 2000-5000; %) The ‘resort over the river’ has funky cabins right on the riverbank. The cabins are lavishly decorated and almost luxurious but don’t quite hit the mark. The bathrooms are tiny but adequate and the restaurant is above average for Gilgit. Unfortunately, the peculiar fish-shaped swimming pool was not functioning at the time of research.

**Eating**

**RESTAURANTS**

The most reliable (in terms of hygiene) restaurants are in the popular hotels, where you may soon tire of seeing the usual suspects on the menu. There is absolutely no alcohol available in Gilgit, even in top-end hotels, so don’t bother asking.

**Salar Restaurant** (Saddar Bazaar; mains Rs 30-160; % 9am-10pm) Has Pakistani standards and interesting ‘Chinese’ items – eg *mantou* (steamed buns) and strange but tasty fried noodles – in clean, low-key surroundings.

**Baig’s Restaurant** (Airport Rd; mains Rs 35-160; % 9am-10pm) Opposite JSR Plaza, Baig’s is gloomy but relatively clean, with good oily Pakistani dishes for those with strong constitutions.
KARAKORAM HIGHWAY

Based at Gilgit’s top hotel, mains Rs 200-400) Askari Snacks (Shahrah-e-Quaid-e-Azam Rd; ☏ 8am-2pm & 4-10pm) You can grab a coffee (Rs 15) or tea here and sit in the garden with limited shade and enjoy your bakery items. It is adjacent to Askari Bakery.

SELF-CATERING

Stands on Airport Rd and on the approach to the footbridge on Pul Rd sell fruit and vegetables, especially in the evening. A sabzi mandi (vegetable market) is along the west side of Jama Mosque. Apricots usually appear in June; apples, pomegranates, walnuts and Gilgit’s own peaches can be found in early autumn. Fresh naan (flat bread) is sold right from the tandoor (clay oven) in the sabzi mandi and elsewhere, but it’s gone soon after 9am and is available again in the evenings.

Scattered along Gilgit’s main thoroughfares are numerous dry fruit and nut traders. Almonds from Gilgit, walnuts from Dainyor, apricots from Hunza and grapes from Kashgar all make great staples for long road trips and treks. Try Khan Bahadur’s North Pole Traders (Airport Rd).

Numerous bakeries and general stores have biscuits, sweets, jam, cornflakes, soup mixes, long-life milk and juices, tinned cheese and pickles to spice up bland curries. Askari Bakeries. There’s a CSD supermarket behind Askari Bakery in Jutial.

You can buy dahi (yogurt) at general stores, or one of the yogurt shops at the back of the sabzi mandi; say pita for drink here and jata for takeaway (Rs 12).

SHOPPING

CAMPING EQUIPMENT SALES & RENTAL

Karokoram Mountaineering Equipment (Airport Rd) Formerly known as Gown House (and maybe still sporting the old sign).

Lonlifre Mountaineering Equipment ( ☏ 53513; Airport Rd) Sales and rental. The secondhand gear is shipped from Europe via Karachi and can be a good buy. The new stuff is from China but is not ‘export quality’ so be careful. Sleeping-bag hire is Rs 50 per day. Sold items may be bought back at half price. Reasonable selection of down jackets, stoves etc.

Trekking Equipment & Gift Shop ( ☏ 52457; c/o Madina Hotel & Guest House, NLI Chowk)

HANDICRAFTS

There’s a clutch of similar shops around Hunza Chowk that sell gemstones and old...
musical instruments, as well as woollen hats (Rs 60 to Rs 300) and waistcoats (Rs 250 to Rs 1000) that vary greatly in quality. An NA bargain is the durable, hand-woven wool (patti or pattu) of Hunza and Nagyr – coarse, thick and tight, with an uneven grain.

Xama Stores (Airport Rd) By the Park Hotel, Xama has a dusty collection of old jewellery, handicrafts, carpets and flintlocks.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Hunza Computers (NLI Chowk) For ultra cheap memory cards for cameras, burning to CD (Rs 100) etc.
Javed Digital Color Lab (Saddar Bazaar)
JJ Color Lab Kodak Express (NLI Chowk)

Getting There & Away

AIR

PIA (50348; Domyal Link Rd) also has an office at the airport (50354). There are two flights to/from Islamabad each day (one way Rs 3540), weather permitting. The waiting list can get very long in poor weather. Be sure to follow the instructions outlined by the PIA office staff. It’s very important to check/confirm one hour before your flight at the airport office or you won’t be on the manifest, which means you won’t be on the plane.

BUS & MINIBUS

The general bus stand is well out of town near the intersection with the KKH. Most long-distance buses terminate here. Catch a taxi (Rs 70 to Rs 80) or a Suzuki (Rs 8) to or from town. There are several companies operating from here, some with booking offices in town.

K-2 Tours (51103) An office is just outside the gate of the Madina Hotel & Guest House as well as at the general bus stand.
Mashabrum Tours (53095; NLI Chowk) Also at the general bus stand (52784).
Natco (50684; Punial Rd) Also at the general bus stand (50435).
Sargin Travel Service (54591; General Bus Stand)
Silk Route Transport Company (55234; General Bus Stand)
Tais Transport Service (55774, 033553926; General Bus Stand) A 24-hour operation that launches heavily loaded minibuses up the KKH to Hunza, Nagyr and Gojal.

Chitral, Punial, Ishkoman, Yasin & Ghizar

Yaqub from Gupis travels to/from Chitral (about Rs 10,000 for up to four passengers) via the Shandur Pass and can be contacted at Madina Hotel & Guest House (see p275). Natco buses and Land Cruisers leave from the Natco bus yard (Punial Rd), which is hidden down the first laneway immediately behind the Kakakhel General Store. Natco fares for Chitral and destinations west of Gilgit include the following:

Chitral (Rs 650, 16 hours) Ten-seat Land Cruiser at least once a week in summer, usually Sunday. Alternative is a daily minibus to Mastuj (Rs 360) where you can board a minibus to Chitral (Rs 130).
Gakuch (Rs 60) On the Yasin or Gupis bus.
Gupis (Rs 90) Departure 9.30am.
Ishkoman (Rs 90) Departure 11am.
Yasin (bus Rs 90) Departure 9.30am.

Hunza, Nagyr & Gojal

From the general bus stand, Tais Transport Service and Sargin Travel Service have minibuses departing from 7am, stopping at Karimabad (Rs 100), Gulmit (Rs 135), Passu (Rs 160) and Sost (Rs 185, five hours). Natco has one bus daily to Aliabad (Rs 80, departing 7am), a short distance from Karimabad.

Rawalpindi

From the general bus stand, buses (usually air-con) bound for Rawalpindi can take anything from 12 to 18 hours. Most terminate at the chaotic Pir Wadhai bus stand.

Mashabrum Tours (Rs 650) Daily departures noon, 3pm and 5pm.
Natco (Rs 650 to Rs 800) Daily departures at 7am, 8am, 1pm, 3pm, 5pm and 6pm. Different classes of vehicles leave at these times, ranging from rattle-trap bus to air-con Coaster.
Sargin Travel Service (Rs 650) Daily 3pm Coaster service.

Skardu

From the general bus stand, minibuses take about six hours. Try to get a window seat on the right-hand side (going to Skardu) for heart-stopping views.

K-2 Tours (Rs 200, six hours) Three departures daily from 8am.
Mashabrum Tours (Rs 200) Three minibus departures 8am, 10am and noon.
Natco (Rs 130) Daily 9am minibus.

Other Destinations & Options

Private transport (jeeps and minibuses) departs from where people from outlying areas have their shops; eg Jamaat Khana Bazaar for Hunza, lower Khazana Rd for Nagyr, Garhi Bagh for Haramosh and Bagrot, and Punial
Rd for the upper Gilgit River basin. There are minibuses (Rs 50) to Chalt/Minapin leaving from near the corner of Shaheed-e-Millat and Khazana Rds after noon. Natco has a daily minibus (Rs 130) to Astor village leaving from the general bus stand.

Though it would mean passing through and missing the best that northern Pakistan has to offer, Natco’s daily bus to Kashgar (US$14 or rupee equivalent, 15 hours) leaves the general bus stand at 6am. You need to book your ticket the day before. Note that the service operates from 1 May to the end of December (snow levels permitting); that is, beyond the dates that non-Pakistani/Chinese foreigners may cross the Khunjerab Pass (1 May to 15 November). At the time of writing Natco and the Chinese had agreed to allow returning buses to carry passengers and so every alternate day the bus is a Chinese bus not a Natco bus. If you can organise it, the Natco bus (and drivers) is the better (safer) option.

FOUR-WHEEL DRIVE RENTAL
For jeep or minibus rental, ask the travel agencies (see p274), or your hotel-wallah. At the time of research, you could hire a 4WD to Skardu or Sost for about Rs 6000.

GETTING AROUND
TO/FROM THE AIRPORT
The cheapest means is a passenger Suzuki to Airport Chowk (Rs 8), plus a 10-minute walk to the airport from there. A hired Suzuki is Rs 60. Several hotels have free airport transfers.

BICYCLE
Mountain bikes are rented out at Shehnaz Cycle Co (☎ 50913; Hunza Chowk) for Rs 300 per day.

PASSENGER SUZUKIS
Passenger Suzukis go to Jutial and the general bus stand (Rs 8) from in front of the post office at Saddar Bazaar, and to Dainyor from the east end of Garhi Bagh. They can be flagged down anywhere, but not beyond 9pm. Suzukis also run west from P unial Rd.

AROUND GILGIT
Kargar Buddha & Kargar Nala
A Buddhist survivor, the large standing Buddha carved on a cliff face in Kargar Nala, west of Gilgit, may date from the 7th century. From P unial Rd, it’s a 5km hike. Alternatively, you can jump off a minibus to Baseen (Rs 12) or hire a Suzuki for a three-hour return trip (Rs 400). A 10-minute walk up the left-hand side of Kargar Nala is Shuko Gah (Gah is Shina for ‘stream’), and the Buddha is high above this gully. Local kids may ‘guide’ you there, but be careful – their short cuts can include difficult scrambles.

Further up Shuko Gah is Napur village, the ruins of a monastery and stupa, and a cave where Buddhist birch-bark texts (now called the Gilgit Manuscripts) were found in the 1930s. Cave is kor in Shina. A return option with good valley views is to continue on this high path to Barmas village, and then back down into Gilgit.

Jutial Nala & Taj Mughal’s Monument
A fairly easy hike from Jutial along a high water channel gives a fine panorama of the valley, plus Rakaposhi and other peaks. Take a Jutial Suzuki from Saddar Bazaar to the end of the line, below Gilgit Serena Hotel. Half a kilometre uphill past Gilgit Serena, turn right and then left up the nala. Climb till you see a stream going off to the right – the headworks of the water channel.

Several kilometres along the channel, you can scramble 100m up to Taj Mughal’s monument. At Barmas village, near some water tanks, descend Hospital Rd into Gilgit. The hike from Gilgit Serena Hotel to the bazaar takes under two hours. A variation is to climb into Jutial Nala, then two hours up to pine forests and excellent Rakaposhi views. Another is to continue on the channel to Napur and the Kargar Buddha.

These walks are extremely hot in July and August. If there have been more than a few hours of rain in recent days, stay away: the hillsides are very prone to rockslides.

Dainyor
A virtual ‘suburb’ of Gilgit and perhaps Pakistan’s southernmost Ismaili village, Dainyor makes a relaxing day trip. From Saddar Bazaar, Suzukis go to Dainyor Bazaar on the KKH via suspension bridges.

Overlooking the Hunza River is a shrine to a 17th- or 18th-century Shiite preacher named Sultan Alib. Get off the Suzuki when it tops the climb on the east side of the Hunza River, doubling back by foot on a path above the road.

From Dainyor Bazaar it’s 1.5km south on the KKH to a melancholy cemetery (on the left
behind a large gate) with the graves of Chinese KKH workers.

There is a rock in Dainyor village with Sanskrit inscriptions about 7th- and 8th-century Tibetan rulers. It’s located on private property and you may be asked for a few rupees to see it. From the bazaar, go 1km north on the KKH to a jeep road on the right. Up the road, after just less than a kilometre, start to ask for ‘old writing stone’ – likitu giri in Shina.

**NALTAR VALLEY**

Naltar was the Gilgit Agency’s hill station, where the British administrators retreated when the summer heat grew oppressive. Most of the guides who know the valleys around Gilgit call this one the loveliest. Its postcard alpine scenery is accessible for overnight trips, or even a fast day trip by jeep from Gilgit, and it gets crowded in summer.

The valley meets the Hunza River at Nomal, 25km north of Gilgit, where a bridge makes a short cut to the KKH. Soon a jeep road strikes left and climbs a rocky canyon, passing a relaxed police checkpoint and a hydro power scheme beside the Naltar River. After 6km to 7km you pass Lower Naltar village (kilini Naltar in Shina, the local speech), and a further 5km to 6km brings you to ajini Naltar (Upper Naltar) at about 3000m. Here the valley opens out and begins to look alpine. Across the river is a Pakistan Air Force winter survival school.
From Upper Naltar it’s a beautiful 12km hike on a bad jeep road up to Naltar Lake and dense pine forests. No guide is necessary. Beyond this are more pastures and summer settlements. See p350 for a description of a five-day walk over the Pakora Pass from Upper Naltar.

Sleeping & Eating
There’s no accommodation at Lower Naltar, while Upper Naltar has several seasonal options. The most reliable (in terms of being open in the shoulder seasons) and friendly is the modest **Hilltop Hotel** (05811-57011; camping/tent d Rs 50/100, d Rs 250) with three, very unpretentious double rooms, a permanent tent and a garden where you can pitch your own tent. There’s no running water but a bucket of hot water is available in the morning. Other hotels nearby include the 4 View and ‘three-star deluxe’ Palace Hotel, which were not open at the time of research.

On the west side of the valley is a very popular **NAPWD resthouse** (d standard/VIP Rs 300/500). Gujar kids with sticky fingers mean the hotel gardens are the safest place for camping. Only basic meals, which taste pretty good at this elevation, will be available.

During the summer (usually from June to September) a couple of camp sites with kitchens open at Naltar Lake.

Getting There & Around
At least two or three passenger jeeps leave Gilgit’s general bus stand each afternoon for Naltar (Rs 60), but be sure yours goes to Upper Naltar or be prepared to hike up from Lower Naltar. Gilgit to Upper Naltar takes two to 2½ hours by jeep. A special hire was Rs 2500 return at the time of research. Most Gilgit travel agencies have Naltar packages.

At Upper Naltar you may be able to hire a horse for a day trip or overnight trip to Naltar Lake; ask your hotel-wallah.

PUNIAL, ISHKOMAN, YASIN & GHIZAR
The Gilgit River basin upstream of Gilgit is a paradise for trekkers and anglers. Once a nest of small feuding kingdoms, it’s still a surprising patchwork of people and languages, with hardly any settlement big enough to be called a town. The population is 80% to 85% Ismaili (it was through here that Ismailism arrived from Afghanistan). Most others are Sunni, with some Shiites in Yasin. The only visible women are Ismailis, who dress in bright colours and pillbox caps, and are unveiled in public.

The old valley kingdoms are Punial (poon-yaal), above Gilgit; Ishkoman (eesh-ko-man), entering from the north about 80km up the Gilgit River; Yasin (ya-seen), which enters at about 110km; and Ghizar (ghuh-zr), stretching west to the Shandur Pass into Chitral. They now comprise Ghizar district, hived off from Gilgit district in 1989, with its headquarters at Gakuch.

The mountains are the Hindu Raj, an arm of the Hindukush (to geographers, the Karakoram Range only begins east of Ishkoman). The lower reaches are hot in summer and unexceptional to look at, but the upper valleys are grandly beautiful. The route is dotted with ancient petroglyphs of ibex and other animals.

Most overlanders who pass through are on their way to/from Chitral – one of the best cheap adventures in the NA is to drive this scenic road. Though there’s still plenty of rough gravel, and there are some long hills between villages, a few intrepid cyclists have ridden it. You need to carry food and a tent.

Getting There & Away
Buses and minibuses leave daily (usually in the morning) from Natco’s Punial Rd bus yard in Gilgit for Gupis (Rs 90, six hours), Ishkoman (Pakora; Rs 80, six to seven hours) and Yasin (Rs 90, six to seven hours). For Gakuch (Rs 60, four hours) catch either the Yasin or Gupis buses.

Less predictable are cargo and passenger jeeps leaving from shops along Punial Rd in Gilgit. Ask at Kakakhel General Store about Gupis, Phander and Teru. For Ishkoman, you can ask in Gakuch (at the auto-parts shop opposite the Snowdrop Inn) about jeeps to Chatorkhand and Imit. On most days, cargo jeeps go from Gupis to Phander and/or Teru.

To get to the Shandur Pass or to continue on to Chitral, Natco runs a 10-seat Land Cruiser at least once a week (Rs 650 to Chitral, 16 hours) in summer from Gilgit. Alternatively, there’s a daily minibus to Mastuj (Rs 360), from where you can board a minibus to Chitral (Rs 130). Readers continually praise the Gilgit–Chitral service offered by ‘Driver Yaqub’ from Gupis who can be contacted at Madina Hotel & Guest House (05811-53536). The cost is about Rs 10,000
for four people and all their gear. If you can afford it, the most reliable option is to hire a jeep and driver in Gilgit from a travel agency such as Travel Walji’s (see p274). The Shandur Pass is usually open from June to late October, and it is not unknown for travellers to resort to several hours’ walking through snow in May to ‘get to the other side’.

Punial

The road hugs the Gilgit River, a swift opal-blue stream in autumn and a silty torrent fed by melting glaciers in summer. At Sherqila, about 40km from Gilgit, there’s a police checkpoint on the road, though the village is across the river. Singhal, 53km from Gilgit, has an Aga Khan Health Services Pakistan (AKHSP) hospital. Singhal Gah is a well-known trout reach.

The valley broadens at the district headquarters of Gakuch (also with good trout fishing), where, 12km beyond Singhal, there’s a suspension bridge across the Gilgit River servicing the road up the Ishkoman Valley. Gakuch itself is a further 5km beyond the turn-off. There’s little reason to stop except to catch onwards transport. Just beyond Gakuch yawns the impressive mouth of the Ishkoman Valley. As you continue up beside the Gilgit River, keep an eye open for ancient petroglyphs chipped into the dark shiny rocks. The villages are resplendent in autumn colours in October.

SLEEPING & EATING

Ghizar Tourist Cottage (☎ 05814-58032; d Rs 600) At Singhal, the welcoming Ghizar Tourist Cottage has plans to expand to 12 rooms. It has a very pleasant garden shaded by fruit trees, and an unusually plush dining hall (mains Rs 80 to Rs 90).

Hotel Green Palace (☎ 05814-51121; s/d Rs 1000/1500) The best accommodation in Gakuch can be found west of the bazaar at the Green Palace, with its comfortable stone cottages (divided into two private rooms) and fishy-sounding Trout Restaurant (mains Rs 85 to Rs 170).

Other options in Gakuch are rather scruffy and include the Hill Haven (☎ 05814-51110; s/d Rs 200/250), east of the bazaar, and the central Karim Guesthouse and Three Star Hotel & Restaurant.

Golapur and Singhal have heavily used NAPWD resthouses (d Rs 300), where you can camp in the grounds with permission from the chief engineer (☎ 05811-50307) in Gilgit.

Ishkoman

Chatorkhand, 25km from Gakuch, is the traditional seat of the pir of Chatorkhand, head of a line of hereditary religious leaders who came from Bukhara in Central Asia in the early 19th century.

Ishkoman is best known for treks; see p350. Other treks go west to Yasin; for details see Lonely Planet’s Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush.

SLEEPING

At Chatorkhand, you’ll find the basic Zuhaib Guesthouse (☎ 05814-58100; d Rs 300), Chatorkhand and Imit (which is about 30km beyond Chatorkhand) both have NAPWD resthouses (d Rs 300), booked via the chief engineer (☎ 05811-50307) in Gilgit.

Yasin

The Yasin and Ghizar Rivers join near Gupis to form the Gilgit River. Across a Chinese-built bridge and 25km north of Gupis is Yasin village. From here it’s about 40km to the valley’s highest village, Darkot, beyond which is the Darkot Pass (a restricted trekking zone) into Chitral’s upper Yarkhun Valley.

By the time he died in 1857, Yasini ruler Gohar Aman held everything down to Astor, but six years later Kashmiri soldiers retook it all, and massacred some 1200 people at Yasin village.

SLEEPING

Yasin village has an NAPWD resthouse (d Rs 300), and a few kilometres north at Taus is a small serai.

Ghizar

This ruggedly beautiful valley meets the Yasin Valley at Gupis, 40km up the Gilgit River from Gakuch (the valley is sometimes called Gupis too). Ghizar is the best place between Gilgit and Chitral to put up your feet. Gupis has a post office and digital phone exchange.

Just beyond Gupis (about 9km) is Khalti Lake (a natural dam on the Ghizar River) and the small village of Jhandrot. About a three-hour drive beyond Gupis, the road crosses the river at the village of Chashi and rises through a vast graveyard. About 60km from Gupis, where the valley opens wide, is Phander (fun-dr), a
picture-postcard place to break the journey. Flour milled locally from wheat grown in the low-terraced fields here has a reputation for producing excellent chapatis. Horses can be hired at Phander for local trips. If you want to linger, the places to do it are Phander and Teru (3100m high, 22km from Phander).

An hour on from Phander at Gulagnmuli village, Hundrup Gol (gol meaning ‘canyon’), with its world-class trout stream, gapes to the south. With the Shandur Pass area, this canyon forms Shandur-Hundrup National Park (see right).

A short distance (about 5km) beyond Teru is the small village of Barsat, the last village before the Shandur Pass. Beyond Barsat is the broad, picturesque Langar Valley where yaks graze and people cut peat for winter fuel.

SLEEPING & EATING

In Gupis, Kakakhel Hotel (tr Rs 300), with two basic triple rooms, is at the west end of the village. Central Snow Leopard Inn (05813-55070; s/d Rs 150/250) is a good restaurant with some very basic rooms in a separate building, behind and underneath the bazaar shops. Gupis also has an NAPWD resthouse (d Rs 300).

With great views upvalley to Khalti Lake as well as downvalley, the PTDC Motel Gupis (05813-58071; s/d Rs 1200/1500) is strikingly situated about 8km beyond Gupis. The spacious, comfortable rooms, decent restaurant and friendly manager combine with the views to make this a memorable place to stay. Down by the lake is Lake View Hotel (05813-58050; dm/d Rs 50/350), apparently a favourite with anglers. It has OK doubles with hot water but an atmosphere of neglect. The dorm has an outside bathroom and no hot water. At the nearby small bazaar of Jhandrot you can purchase seasonal fruit and vegetables.

About 2km east of Phander bazaar, overlooking Phander Lake, is a wonderfully sited NAPWD resthouse (d Rs 300). Across the road, Over the Lake Hotel & Restaurant (d in tent Rs 150, d Rs 300) has one tent and three comfortable and clean double rooms, which share a toilet and a cold-water tap. The owner, who is one of the chowkidars for the resthouse, can provide basic, inexpensive meals or cook your provisions. The PTDC Motel Phander (05813-58071; s/d Rs 1200/1500) is nicely situated by the lake and shares management with PTDC Motel Gupis. The usual spacious rooms, clean bedding and workable restaurant make it a good choice. At the west end of Phander bazaar is the small seasonal Tourist Inn (d Rs 200) with cheaper beds in tents, and charpoys.

Teru has only a sublimely primitive NAPWD resthouse (d Rs 300), while at Barsat there is Hotel Barsat (thin mattress on wooden platform Rs 100) with rustic dorm accommodation and prices inclusive of dinner and breakfast. There are plenty of blankets – and you will need them in spring or autumn – but not much food. Bring your own provisions or enjoy the potatoes!

Shandur Pass

The 3810m Shandur Pass, 50km from Phander and 108km back to Gupis, is actually broad enough to have several lakes and a polo ground where the best players from Gilgit and Chitral meet every July, part of a three- or four-day festival of polo and merrymaking (see the boxed text, p276).

With Hundrup Gol, the Shandur Pass area forms the 518-sq-km Shandur-Hundrup National Park (see p68). It was declared a national park in 1993, partly in the hope of keeping an environmental lid on the polo tournament and the mess left by its 12,000-plus spectators. Visitors will find nothing to indicate its boundaries.

For details of the road and towns on the Chitral side of the Shandur, see p233.

BALTISTAN

Rising in Tibet, as one of the four sacred rivers, the Indus flows northwest almost to Gilgit, in a deep trough dividing the Himalaya from the Karakoram, and the Indian subcontinent from Asia. Before turning south it drains Baltistan, or ‘Little Tibet’, an arid land inhabited by people who today speak classical Tibetan and in the 17th century were the masters of Chitral, the NA and Ladakh.

Buddhism probably came to Baltistan in the 3rd century with Gandharan missionaries, and again when it was part of the Tibetan empire in the 8th and 9th centuries. Islam arrived in the 15th century, probably via Kashmir. Baltistan then consisted of several small kingdoms; the most important were Rondu and Skardu on the Indus, Khaplu, Shigar and Astor. Skardu’s Maqpon dynasty gradually absorbed the others.

Near the Balti capital of Skardu the Indus is joined by the Shigar and Shyok Rivers, flowing down from the Baltoro Muztagh, a segment
of the Karakoram backbone containing the densest mass of glaciers and high mountains on earth, including 8611m K2, second only to Mt Everest. Naturally, there are unparalleled opportunities for trekking and mountaineering, and it is the escalating impacts of these activities that led to the establishment in 1993 of the 9738-sq-km Central Karakoram National Park (p68). This is by far Pakistan’s biggest protected area, stretching north into Gojal, west to Haramosh and Rakaposhi, south almost to Skardu and Khaplu, and east to the crest of the High Karakoram.

Until an air route was opened from Islamabad in the 1960s, Baltistan remained almost medieval in its isolation. From 1972 to 1985, simultaneous with construction of the KKH, Pakistan Army Engineers cut a road up the Indus that is more formidable than most of the KKH.

The poorly defined northern end of the Line of Control tempted India in 1982 to send troops onto the Siachen Glacier in Baltistan’s eastern corner, which Pakistan regards as part of the NA. The two countries have militarised the area, skirmishing repeatedly in what has come to be called ‘the highest war on earth’.

But away from this off-limits zone, amid awesome scenery, are world-class treks, two national parks and villages that seem hardly touched by the 21st century. Nearly everyone is Shiite Muslim and not a woman is visible in Skardu. Men and women visitors alike should dress conservatively; shorts are out, and even bare arms put orthodox backs up. Many people of Shigar and Khaplu belong to the Nurbakhshi branch of Islam, whose women are unveiled and as open and brightly dressed as the Ismailis of Hunza.

The tourist season is April to October. Midsummer is hot in Skardu; it’s also prime mountaineering season, so jeeps and hotel space may be hard to find. You can fly in from Islamabad even in winter, though schedules are very unpredictable and only a few hotels still operate then.

**THE GILGIT TO SKARDU ROAD**

Thirty-eight kilometres south of Gilgit, the road to Skardu (170km) leaves the KKH and crosses a bridge and a spit of rock into the upper Indus Valley. Ten minutes from the bridge is a perfect panorama of the entire Nanga Parbat massif, and shortly afterwards there’s a brief view ahead to Rakaposhi’s south face. Fifteen minutes later the Indus is at its northernmost point. Another 15 minutes on (27km from the KKH) is the fuel stop of Sassi, a green island in a sea of crumbling rocks.

With its size, desolation and the nonstop foaming fury of the Indus, the gorge from here south is simply awesome. Where there are no bridges, people still cross by pulling themselves hand over hand in a sphincter-puckering contraption consisting of a platform hung from a pulley on a single cable, often hundreds of metres above the river. At the truck stop of Thangus, 53km from the KKH, look across the river for miners scraping out a living by burrowing into the mountain’s quartz veins for crystals.

Another 7km further on is a popular travellers’ stop at the basic Midway Hotel and, across the road, PTDC Astak, about 89km from Skardu. About 3½ hours from the KKH (2½ hours from Skardu) is the regional centre Thowar. Across the river is Mendi, capital of the ancient Rondu kingdom. Below Basho the canyon opens into the vast Skardu Valley, and an hour later you’re in Skardu bazaar.

In good weather the 170km trip takes six to seven hours, with at least two police checkpoints. In rainy weather (eg summer storms and winter drizzle) multiple slides may block it completely.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**PTDC Motel Astak** (s/d Rs 1200/1500) If you need a room there are four very comfortable doubles here. Breakfast is served from 6.30am to 9.30am, lunch from 11am to 3pm and dinner from 6pm to 10pm. Mains cost Rs 90 to Rs 120, and a buffet lunch is Rs 350.

**Midway Hotel & Restaurant** (snacks Rs 20-50) Minibuses tend to stop for a toilet break here, where you can have a cup of tea, stretch your legs and have a look at a couple of rock shops. It’s a good idea to bring your own snacks and water rather than rely on the offerings here.

**Thowar** has an **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300).

**SKARDU**

The Indus barely seems to move across the immense, flat Skardu Valley, 40km long, 10km wide and carpeted with silvery grey sand dunes. In between dust storms the land seems cleansed and freeze-dried, and the light is intense. The brown mountains give no hint
of the white giants beyond. Skardu, at 2290m, is on a ledge at the foot of Karpochu, a rock sticking 300m out of the plain.

The town has been a mountaineers’ haunt for over 150 years, and a military headquarters since Partition, but it’s also the base for many classic Karakoram treks (introduced in the Trekking in Northern Pakistan chapter; see p331), and even some good day trips. Midsummer is prime mountaineering season, when jeeps and hotel space may be hard to find. Walking and trekking can be pleasant even in October, when prices start to fall and the weather is clear and cold. From November to March, temperatures drop to freezing.

Hotels get booked out in the second week of August, when Skardu hosts a big tournament of Baltistan’s polo teams to celebrate Pakistan’s Independence Day.

Orientation
Along the main road is Naya (New) Bazaar and in the back streets the more interesting Purana (Old) Bazaar. Reference points are Yadgar Chowk, with a monument to the uprising against the Maharaja of Kashmir, and Hussaini Chowk, near the 17th-century aqueduct. The cheaper hotels are near Yadgar. Government offices are well east or south of the bazaar. The airport is 12km west on the road to Gilgit.

Information
There is a PTDC (50291; PTDC K2 Motel), but you’ll probably get as much information from your hotel. The National Bank (Naya Bazaar) near Yadgar Chowk will change cash and travellers cheques, but you can also change cash with moneychangers and other banks. There is no ATM in Skardu. Beside the government telephone exchange (Kazmi Bazaar; 7am-12.30am) is a police post. The post office, PIA and Pakistan army base are well east of the bazaar.

Theoretically, Baltistan’s NAPWD rest-houses can be booked via the Skardu and Ghanche district chief engineers in Skardu, but you’d probably have better luck with the chief engineer (5811-50307) in Gilgit. Or try your luck without a booking, but be ready to camp in the gardens if necessary.
There is one internet café, Comsats (Kazmi Bazaar; per hr Rs 60) and numerous PCOs scattered throughout the town.

**Sights & Activities**

**KARPOCHU**

Ali Sher Khan probably built the fort (admission Rs 50) on the east end of this rock in the 17th century, but the Dogras trashed and rebuilt it. It’s a half-hour climb to the partly reconstructed fort, from where there are fine valley views. The path starts beside the Hilton International Hotel. From the polo ground, there is a track around the base of the rock. Knock and yell for assistance if the fort door is closed.

You can get to the summit (and the ruins of more fortifications, and amazing views) by a steep, dry, three-hour scramble up the west end of the rock from near the Hotel Sadpara International. Take care, as this route has some false paths taking you near unprotected and dangerous drops.

**QATAL GAH**

The brightly painted complex behind the Baltistan Tourist Cottage includes a mosque, an imam barga (a hall used during Shiite festivals of Ashura and Chelum) and a huge graveyard. It’s said to be a little replica of one in Iraq. Except during the two festivals, foreigners can visit if they’re conservatively dressed.

**ITALIAN K2 MUSEUM**

The huge tent in the garden of the PTDC K2 Motel was set up in 2004 to commemorate the first successful summiting of K2 by an Italian expedition in 1954. There are numerous interesting photos documenting this expedition as well as previous expeditions into remote Baltistan. Well worth a look.

**TREKKING & TOURING**

Many people come to Skardu already booked on an adventure; however, it’s certainly possible to organise or join a trek or jeep safari once you are here. Virtually everyone running a hotel also has family connections in the adventure travel industry. The following agencies/guides are recommended:

- **Adventure Travel** (☎ 50935; 03469558819; www.adventure-touroperator.com; 1 College Rd) Organises numerous treks, including fixed departures (check the website), and has a relaxing ‘base camp’ at Kachura Lake. The office is on the main road near the entrance to Mashabrum Hotel.

- **Ali Haider Sadpara** (☎ 53046; alihaiders_mountain_guide@yahoo.com) A small operation for budget travellers with gear available for hire. Make inquiries at the Baltistan Tourist Cottage.

- **Khorpa Care** (☎ 55140; support@khorpacare.org; 1st fl, Abbas Market, Kazmi Bazaar) Trekkers and climbers should avail themselves of the organisation dedicated to the welfare of the Balti porters, known as khorpas (Balti for carrier). Pick up tips on how to hire khorpas responsibly, or ensure your trekking company does likewise, as well as donate equipment or money.

- **Longlife Mountaineering Equipment** (☎ 50583; Kazmi Bazaar) For last-minute equipment sales and hire, but don’t expect top-shelf gear.

- **Travel Walji’s** (☎ 50935; www.waljises.com; Satpara Rd) Virtually a branch of the Gilgit office, this is a good place to inquire about jeep safaris across the Deosai Plains.

**Sleeping**

**BUDGET**

- **Baltistan Tourist Cottage** (☎ 52707; btciqbal@yahoo.com; Naya Bazaar; dm/s/d/tr Rs 70/100/200/250; i) Easily the best budget hotel in town with clean rooms, good food and manager Mohammad Iqbal, a great source of budget-minded help. This is also the home of Ali Haider, a recommended mountain guide.

- **Hunza Inn 5 Brothers** (☎ 52570; College Rd; d Rs 200) The run-down, rather filthy rooms with squat toilet and cold shower make this option a last resort.

- **Karakoram Inn** (☎ 55438; Naya Bazaar; s/d Rs 200/400) Unfortunately, the simple rooms, a few doubles with TV, and restaurant are all looking very neglected and unkempt.

- **Hilton International Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 5581; Naya Bazaar; s/d/tr Rs 300/500/1000) The cheekily named Hilton is not quite five star and the rooms have deteriorated and are overpriced. Be careful of the switches and wiring if you do stay here.

**MIDRANGE**

- **Hotel Sadpara International** (☎ 52951; College Rd; s/d Rs 300/600) Unfortunately, the simple rooms, a few doubles with TV, and restaurant are all looking very neglected and unkempt.

Three kilometres south of the bazaar is the NAPWD Baltoro resthouse (d Rs 300), but public transport is nonexistent.
VIP room out the back with TV, carpet and good views for Rs 700. The restaurant here is very good and the staff are very experienced with travel and trekking information. They also do money exchange.

Skardu Inn (54086; College Rd; s/d Rs 450/650) This skinny, high-rise hotel was being renovated at the time of research and the rooms with TVs should be worth inspecting.

Concordia Motel (52582; fax 52547; Hospital Rd; s/d Rs 1000/1200, s/d deluxe Rs 1800/2000;  ) A little further from the bazaar and with a similar view of the Indus River to the PTDC, Concordia has good-value standard rooms, though check the mattress for comfort. The deluxe rooms in the new wing are fabulous, with excellent views. The management here are very helpful and can organise jeep safaris, day trips and overnight jaunts.

Mashabrum Hotel (50395; hotelmashabrum@yahoo .com; College Rd; mains Rs 120-350; 7am-10pm) This large hotel has Skardu’s most extensive Pakistani, Chinese and Continental menu, featuring speciality dishes such as the mouth-watering, slow-cooked beef nahari, mutton leg roast and chicken handi (in gravy).

Other decent hotel restaurants include the budget Baltistan Tourist Cottage (mains Rs 50-80) with good chips, omelettes and mutton karai, and the midrange Indus Motel (mains Rs 60-100) with a tasty chicken rice pulao (Rs 75), as well as Pakistani and Chinese standards.

Skardu is hard work for vegetarians, but there’s fruit in summer, and many general stores and bakeries. United Bakery (Yadgar Chowk) has baked goods, but also plenty of packaged groceries, drinks etc. Head to Askari Bakery (Chashma Bazaar) for fresher bread, cakes and biscuits.

Getting There & Away

AIR

PIA (50284, airport 58150; Chasma Bazaar) flies Boeing 737s to Islamabad (Rs 2700) daily at 11.20am (weather permitting), with views right across the Karakoram. The Islamabad to Skardu flight departs at 9.30am and arrives at 10.30am. Head out to the airport at least two hours before departure.

BUS

In good weather the 170km trip to/from Gilgit takes six to seven hours. For the best views, sit on the left-hand side heading for Gilgit. In rainy weather, multiple rockfalls may block the road for days. Rawalpindi-bound buses will take at least 20 hours and probably stop in Islamabad, but you should confirm this.

K-2 Tours (55582; Hussaini Chowk) has minibuses for Gilgit (Rs 240) departing at 9am, 11am and 1pm. For Khaplu (Rs 100, three hours) a 16-seat Land Cruiser departs at 10am. For Rawalpindi (Rs 850), at least one bus departs daily at 11am.

Mashabrum Tours (55195; Yadgar Chowk) has minibuses to Gilgit (Rs 200) departing at 8am, 10am and noon. To Rawalpindi, a Coaster

Eating

The hotels have the best restaurants in town and most do an adequate job.

Our pick Dewan-e-Khas (55494; www.dewanekhas .com.pk; Raja Rd; mains Rs 50-200; 8am-10pm) This recommended hotel has a great restaurant featuring a small selection of Balti dishes in addition to the extensive Pakistani, Chinese and Continental offerings. Try the excellent local soup of barley, black bean and lentil in mutton broth, and the whole fried trout if it’s available. There are also barbecue and several vegetarian dishes.

Mashabrum Hotel has Skardu’s most extensive Pakistani, Chinese and Continental menu, featuring speciality dishes such as the mouth-watering, slow-cooked beef nahari, mutton leg roast and chicken handi (in gravy).
(Rs 850) departs at 11am and a bus (Rs 800) departs at 4pm. For Khaplu (Rs 100) there’s a 9am departure.

Natco (52188; College Rd) is the best choice for the long-haul trip to Pindi because of the better buses and because they take two drivers. For Pindi, the VIP Coaster (Rs 1100) departs at noon and the VIP deluxe (Rs 850) departs at 3pm. To Gilgit (Rs 125 to Rs 190) departures start at 9am. For Khaplu (Rs 100) there is at least one departure at 8am.

FOUR-WHEEL DRIVE
Four-wheel drives hang out at Yadgar Chowk, available for anything from local trips to multiday safaris across the Deosai Plains. Private ‘special’ jeep hire is also available from many hotels and adventure travel companies, and the following is an example of costs at the time of research: Askole Rs 4500; Astor Rs 8000; Gilgit via Deosai Plains Rs 10,000; Hushe Rs 4000; Khaplu Rs 3000; Satpara Lake Rs 600 (Rs 1000 for all-day fishing trip); and Shigar Rs 1000.

Getting Around
Decrepit passenger taxis ply the bazaars, and a taxi to the airport is about Rs 200.

AROUND SKARDO

Satpara Lake & Buddha
Nine kilometres south of Skardu is beautiful Satpara Lake, brilliant blue and stocked with rainbow trout, but no longer pristine. The construction of two power stations as well as a dam that will raise the level of the lake was still very much under way at the time of research. It is expected that most of the vegetated foreshore and the picturesque island will be submerged. The hotels have already moved up the hill. The walk to the lake is a dry, moderately steep three-hour (8km to 9km) climb up Hargisar Nala from the bazaar. Or you can take the road which is currently choked with trucks and construction vehicles. Ultimately, there will be a paved road to the lake and continuing to the Deosai Plains.

Across Hargisar Nala from the track is a Buddha relief carved on a rock in about the 7th century. About 200m beyond the Baltoro resthouse turning and a cluster of government offices, and just past an Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) office, turn right on a small path. Near the end of this is a footbridge across the nala, and a track up to the Buddha. There and back is a detour of about an hour.

A road, parts of it already paved, runs past the lake and 6km to 8km on to Satpara village. Roughly 25km beyond the village, the track crosses the Ali Malik Mar pass onto the Deosai Plains. The most popular trekking route goes from Skardu up Burji Nala, to the west of Hargisar; see Lonely Planet’s Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush for further details on these and other treks.

ACTIVITIES
Apart from just sitting back and enjoying the lake with a meal, you could go boating, fishing or walking. At Sadpara Lake Inn you can hire a rowboat (per hr Rs 250). The hotel also runs motorboat trips (half/full boatload Rs 400/800). Fishing gear (rental per hr Rs 30) is cheap to hire, but the cost of a fishing licence (which can be arranged by hotel management) is US$10 for foreigners. Trekking equipment hire and guides can also be arranged at Sadpara Lake Inn.

SLEEPING & EATING
Hotels are open from May to October.

Lakeview Motel Sadpara (03465204434; Deosai Rd; camp sites Rs 60, s/d Rs 300/600) The new building with four double rooms and a soon-to-be-completed restaurant is above the lake on Deosai Rd, but at the time of research it was still operating out of the modest old hotel closer to the lake. The friendly manager keeps the place spotless and is able to organise treks, porters, guides and jeeps to the Deosai Plains.

Lakeside Inn (05831-58220; camp sites Rs 200, 2-person tents Rs 500, s/d Rs 600/1200) The Lakeside also has a new hotel under construction, and it’s next door to the Lakeview Motel on Deosai Rd. In the meantime it is using a few shabby former PTDC ‘huts’. While it is still above water, there’s pretty good Pakistani and Chinese food available with excellent views in the lakeside restaurant (mains Rs 60 to Rs 350), where trout from the lake is sometimes on the menu.

PTDC Motel Satpara (05831-50291; c/o PTDC K2 Motel, Skardu; s/d Rs 1200/1500) Dominating the north end of the lake, the large motel looks finished but was not open for business at the time of writing. The word is it will open soon, though it appears to be waiting for the lake to rise or at least the dam wall to be finished.
GETTING THERE & AWAY

Other than the walk described previously (p290), you can hire a taxi from Skardu for about Rs 400 for the round trip. Be sure to ask for a look at the Buddha on the way and negotiate a small fee for waiting around at the lake. A jeep will cost about Rs 600.

Kachura Lake

Thirty kilometres west of Skardu, off the road to Gilgit, this small lake is known mostly for the expensive Shangri-La Tourist Resort (05831-58501; s/d from Rs 5000/7500) with its ersatz Chinese architecture and a DC-3 fuselage converted into a café (not operating at the time of research). This resort purports to be luxury, and though it has a wonderful setting and the cabins are comfortable, overall it falls short of expectations. The Rs 200 entry pass deters day visitors and those who haven’t made a prior booking.

A smaller and more intimate resort overlooking the picturesque lake is Tourist Camping Resort (03469558819; adventure@isb.comsats.net.pk), with a dorm, tents and funky outdoor bathroom. This is the base for Adventure Travel’s (www.adventure-touroperator.com) trekking in the region.

There are petroglyphs along the streamside trail up Shigarthang Lungma (lungma is Balti for a tributary valley), above the lake. This is an alternative to Satpara Lake for trekking the Deosai Plains (Kachura to Astor in four to six days).

Basho Valley

About 45km kilometres west of Skardu, off the road to Gilgit, is a small mountain community of several villages strung along a secluded valley that rises to the Deosai Plains. ‘Basho’ is said to mean ‘grape’ and refers to the valley’s productive fruit growing. This area is quite remote and it is recommended you contact Mr Younus Shehzad (shehzad_basho@hotmail.com) of the Basho Development Organisation for information on the several treks available and village visits. Treks, such as the Naqpo Namsul La, go at least as high as the Deosai plateau and should only be attempted with adequate planning and equipment and, most importantly, local advice and assistance. The season is July to September.

DEOSAI PLAINS

The Deosai Plains, about 50km southwest of Skardu, comprise an immense, uninhab-
Khar, the larger Khanqa-e-Moallah and 14th-century Amburiq. Along the Shigar Valley wall, downriver of Bauma Lungma, are recently excavated Buddhist ruins, including monastery foundations and rock inscriptions from as early as the 5th century.

For views of the Shigar Valley, walk up Bauma Lungma for 20 minutes and double back up to the thumb of rock above the village.

Sleeping & Eating
NAPWD resthouse (d Rs 300) Shigar village has a very pleasant NAPWD resthouse, which has good walk-in odds in May/June and September/October.

Space ( 05831-58710; camping Rs 250, d Rs 700-1000)
Follow the signs towards the Indus River from Shigar village for 2km to this hotel and camping ground. It’s rather remote and, with just three basic rooms, overpriced for what it offers. There is a restaurant (lunch/dinner Rs 300/325) with a set Pakistani menu.

Ourpick Shigar Fort Residence ( 05831-66107; www.shigarfort.com; d from Rs 3850; ) The Aga Khan Trust for Culture has overseen the remarkable restoration of this stunning fort-palace into a singular historic getaway and informative museum. As you might expect, the rooms in the rambling palace are all very different, with enough authenticity to make you feel privileged, if not regal, and enough 21st-century comforts to make you, well, comfortable. For those who prefer a little more modernity, the rooms in the garden house have satellite TVs. There’s a romantic garden, a bubbling mountain stream, a superb restaurant and attentive professional staff. Oh, and room to park your helicopter. Even if you can’t stay the night, a visit to the restaurant (mains Rs 200 to Rs 350) is recommended. Sit under the vine trellis and try the palapo (described as local pasta with apricot, almond and walnut sauce) or the walnutty and equally tasty chicken fasanjoon.

Getting There & Away
The village is 32km from Skardu. From 11am to about 2pm, cargo jeeps go from Hussaini Chowk and surrounding alleys for about Rs 100. A special hire will cost around Rs 1000.

Khaplu Village
This handsome, 2600m-high village of timber-and-stone houses and precision-made dry-stone walls climbs up a wide alluvial fan beneath an arc of jagged granite walls. Ingenious irrigation has made it a shady, fertile oasis. As you climb its twisting track, the icy peaks of the Masherbrum Range rise on
the other side of the valley. It’s hard to imagine a more majestic setting.

A stony track climbs to the lower bazaar (with PCO, shops and a National Bank); a five-minute walk. Half an hour beyond, at a fork in the road, is an elegant but run-down traditional-style house, where royal descendants live. Twenty minutes up the left fork is the polo ground, and uphill from that is the Khaplu Palace, currently under restoration by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. If you get lost, the local word for it is khar, or try ‘Raja palace’. The restoration plan includes the provision of quality accommodation and a museum, similar to Shigar’s former fort-palace (see opposite).

Twenty minutes further up is Chakhchun village, with a carved wooden mosque whose foundations were supposedly laid in the 16th century when the people embraced Islam. Non-Muslims may not enter this or other mosques here. There are several more villages in Ganse Lungma above Chakhchun.

SLEEPING & EATING
Khapalu Inn (☎ 50148; s/d Rs 200/400) In the lower bazaar, with basic rooms with squat toilets and bucket hot water. It has a basic curry and chapati restaurant.

K-7 Hotel & Restaurant (s/d Rs 400/600) On the track up to Chakhchun, an aching hour’s walk from the road, this hotel is open from June to September with clean and comfortable rooms, basic food and good views.

Karakoram Lodge (☎ 51132; www.baltistantours.com; s/d Rs 800/1000) This large hotel boasts magnificent views in addition to its spacious rooms and better-than-average restaurant (mains Rs 80 to Rs 150). It’s a 10-minute walk uphill from the bazaar.

PTDC Khapalu Motel (☎ 50146; s/d Rs 1550/1850) This comfortable motel overlooks the river just beyond the turn-off to the village. The rooms are clean and spacious, and there’s a reliable if boring restaurant (mains Rs 80 to Rs 150). You may get permission to camp in the grounds and use a hot shower.

Just before you reach the PTDC Khapalu Motel there is an NAPWD resthouse (d Rs 300).

GETTING THERE & AWAY
Natco buses depart Skardu at 8am and cost Rs 100. Mashabrum Tours has one bus departing Skardu at 9am (also Rs 100). K-2 Tours leaves Skardu at 10am (Rs 100). Buses depart Khaplu bazaar between 8am and 9am. From Skardu’s Naya Bazaar, cargo jeeps depart from about 11am (Rs 70 to Rs 100). The 103km trip takes about three hours by cargo jeep.

HUSHE & MASHERBRUM VIEWS
Those who would like to see the gorgeous 7821m massif of Masherbrum without trekking to it could try and walk up the Shyok Valley road past the police checkpoint and the turn-off to Hushe Valley towards Surmo. Although at the time of writing the police at Khaplu were not allowing this little excursion, it is worth attempting with a local guide. As the Hushe Valley opens up, Masherbrum looms into view at its head, an unforgettable sight. It’s a flat, hot 6km walk past Brok Lungma and Yuchung village to the best viewpoint, at a turn in the road. Surmo, 3km on, is usually as far as foreigners can go towards the Siachen Glacier.

See p362 for details, and Lonely Planet’s Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush for further options in and around the Hushe Valley.

Hushe Valley
Hushe (hu-shay) is the trekkers’ route to Masherbrum, and an alternative to Shigar for mountaineers heading towards Concordia. For a close look at Masherbrum you can take a four-day (three-night) walk on a moderate grade from Khaplu to Hushe and back, with stops at Kande, Hushe and Kande again.

HUMBROK
These beautiful, spring-fed pastures west of, and high above, Hushe are easy to reach on a day hike (about four hours up and two hours back). From Hushe, cross to the west side of the river on the lower of two bridges and walk for half an hour up Humbrok Nala. Cross it on a wooden bridge and follow the north bank all the way to the pastures. For details on an overnight alternative, including a side trip, see p362.

SLEEPING
Camping sites abound. Machulu has an NAPWD resthouse (d Rs 300). At Kande you can stay at the ultra-basic K6 Hotel & Restaurant above the jeep road to the west.

In Hushe there’s basic accommodation at the Mashabrum Inn, and several camp sites where you can purchase hot food, including Lela Peak Camping, the small K6 & K7 Camping Place, Ghandoghoro La Camping Place and Ghandughoro Camping Place.
GETTING THERE & AWAY
A suspension bridge crosses the Shyok just upriver of Khaplu, and a wide jeep road goes all the way up the Hushe Valley to Hushe village. Cargo jeeps make the 148km trip to Hushe from Skardu, though they’ll have little room for someone getting on near Khaplu. A special hire from Skardu will cost about Rs 4000. From Khaplu a special hire to Kande costs Rs 2000, from where you may be able to find a jeep going to Hushe. In midsummer you might get a lift with a climbing party. But always be prepared to walk the gently climbing 40km from Khaplu to Hushe village – about four hours up the west side of the valley via Saling to Machulu, 3½ hours more to Kande, then 3½ hours on to Hushe village.

HUNZA & NAGYR

The Hunza Valley is the centrepiece of the KKH. The continuous sweep from the Hunza River through mighty, grey-brown scree slopes and up to snowy peaks, including 7788m Rakaposhi, is a reminder of the river’s deep slice across the Karakoram. In spring the famous fruit trees erupt in white blossom, and autumn is a riot of yellow poplars, reddening orchards and golden maize drying on rooftops.

Snaking across the slopes is Hunza’s hallmark, the precision-made stone channels on which the valley’s life depends. Carrying glacier meltwater to tiny stone-walled fields 8km away, they have transformed a ‘mountain desert’ with few horizontal surfaces into a breadbasket. Their paths on the high rock faces are revealed by thin lines of vegetation, and patches of green are visible on the most improbable walls and ledges. Irrigation sustains orchards of Hunza’s famous apricots, as well as peaches, plums, apples, grapes, cherries and walnuts (for more information on Hunza cuisine see the boxed text, p304). Irrigation also waters the fields of maize and wheat, and the ever-present poplars, a fast-growing source of fodder, firewood and timber.

Added to the beauty is a kind of mythology about Hunza’s isolation and purity, spawned by James Hilton’s 1933 novel Lost Horizon, nourished in films about the lost kingdom of Shangri-la, and fostered in the 1970s by media stories of extraordinary health and longevity. The KKH itself has put an end to Hunza’s isolation, and while the Garden of Eden image ignores a rather bloody history, this hardly alters Hunza’s appeal.

‘Hunza’ is commonly (and inaccurately) used for the entire broad valley. In fact, two former princely states, Hunza and Nagyr (nah-gr), with shared language and ancestry, face one another across the river. Hunza refers to the villages on the north bank from Khizerabad to Ghareghat (or sometimes as far as Nazimabad). Gojal is sometimes described as part of Hunza too.

Smaller but more populous Nagyr occupies the entire south side of the valley and the north side around Chalt, and includes Rakaposhi and the lower Hispar Glacier. Although it enjoys less media fame, Nagyr is home to some of the best treks in the Karakoram (many of them described in Lonely Planet’s Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush).

Most people here still think of themselves as subjects of their respective mirs, rather than as Pakistanis. And though they are very hospitable to foreigners, even in remote areas, they are not always so fond of the down-land Pakistanis.

The two kingdoms also have a common language, Burushaski, but nobody is sure where it came from. Wakhi is spoken in upper Hunza (Gojal); in Lower Nagyr (in common with Gilgit), Shina is also used. Many people speak Urdu and English.

Hunza and Nagyr also once shared the Shiite faith, but Hunza is now almost entirely Ismaili (except for Murtazaabadd, Ganish and a few other pockets).

GILGIT TO CHALT

As you enter the Hunza Valley the view is dominated by the 7168m Kampire Dior, located 70km north on the crest of the Karakoram. About 35 minutes (on the bus) from Gilgit is a monument to KKH workers. In Urdu on the base are the words of the philosopher-poet Allama Mohammed Iqbal: ‘God has given humans integrity, faith, and a strong mind, and if they set themselves to it they can kick a mountain to powder or stop a river in its tracks.’ Unfortunately, the immediate area surrounding the monument is an eyesore. Across the river is the Naltar Valley.
Ten minutes on are a clutch of cafés and a road maintenance base called Jaglot Gah, about 42km from Gilgit. Serais here have charpoys and meat and rice meals. Across the river is Gwach Nala and the KKH’s precarious precursor, a now-abandoned jeep road that follows the oldest caravan trails. Ten minutes on is the Chalt turn-off.

**CHALT**

Chalt sits in a bowl at the mouths of two large valley systems, the only part of Nagyr north of the river. Chaprot Valley is probably the most beautiful nala close to the KKH in the NA. Safdar Ali, mir of Hunza at the time of the British invasion, said Chalt and Chaprot were ‘more precious to us than the strings of our wives’ pyjamas’. Excellent treks start here and in the Bar Valley; see Lonely Planet’s *Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush* for further details on these and other treks.

From the KKH, a well-maintained road crosses the river and runs 3km to Chalt, a small bazaar with shops, a post office and a telephone exchange.

**Activities**

**SHORT TREKS AROUND CHALT**

**Ghashumaling**

This is a lovely area in a lower Chaprot tributary, with easy trails and mulberry, peach, apple and walnut orchards. Walks can take from two hours to all day. From Chalt bazaar take the path past the high school and up the south side of the valley. At the head of the canyon, about 12km up, are pine forests and the small Kacheli Glacier.

**Chaprot Valley**

From the bazaar, cross the Chaprot River and turn left. About 150m up, take the left fork, which climbs the north side of Chaprot Valley. It’s an hour’s walk to Chaprot village, and three to four hours from there along a mule track through summer villages to pastures at the head of the valley. In summer, horses can be hired at Chaprot.

**Bar Valley**

From the bazaar, cross the river, turn left and at the next fork keep right into Bar Valley (also called Garamasai or Budalas...
A TALE OF SIBLINGS & RIVALRIES

The origins of the separate Hunza and Nagyr kingdoms are obscured by legend. However, they probably arose from a marriage of royal cousins in the 15th century that produced twin sons, Maglot and Girkis, later to become the rulers, respectively, of Nagyr and Hunza. From infancy, so the story goes, the little princes had a mutual hatred, and as kings they led their people into frequent bloody battles with one another. Over the centuries their royal descendants have continued the feud, even as their families intermarried.

The valley’s modest agricultural output had for years been supplemented by raids on caravans between Kashgar and Kashmir, and by slave trading. Yaqub Beg, who proclaimed an independent Turkestan republic in Xinjiang in the 1860s, put a temporary end to the raids. This economic blow led Hunza and Nagyr to declare allegiance to the British-aligned Maharaja of Kashmir. In 1886 Safdar Ali became mir of Hunza in accordance with the valley’s age-old custom – by murdering his father and three brothers. Within two years he resumed the caravan raids and played host at Baltit Fort (see p300) to a party of Russian ‘explorers’. British India, spreading north from Kashmir, had grown aware of Russia expanding into Central Asia, and Hunza now began to look like a loose cannon on deck.

Britain decided to improve supply lines from Kashmir and reopen its Agency at Gilgit, and inevitably became entangled in Hunza and Nagyr’s bloody politics. Within five years a British-Kashmiri force had occupied the valley and installed its own mir, Nazim Khan, in Hunza. A British garrison remained at Aliabad until 1897. Nazim Khan ruled until his death in 1938, and his son Ghazan Khan until 1945.

Within weeks of the formal partition of India and Pakistan in August 1947, an uprising in Gilgit against the Maharaja of Kashmir, who had opted to join India, brought Hunza and Nagyr into Pakistan. They remained semiautonomous until 1974 when they were merged with Pakistan, reducing their rulers to district officials.

Many older Hunzakuts still fondly recall their last mir, Muhammad Jamal Khan, who died two years after the formal dissolution of the old princely states. His son Ghazanfar Ali still occupies the royal house in Karimabad.

Sleeping & Eating

Chalt Tourist Inn (☎ 05821-59192; Chowk Bazaar; d Rs 400) is located in Chalt Chowk Bazaar and is easily the best option in Chalt, with clean rooms, a reliable restaurant (mains Rs 60 to Rs 100) and a friendly manager who can provide information about walks in the area. Across the bridge is the very basic Kepal Inn (r Rs 100) with one room and the mere possibility of a cold shower. In a walled apricot orchard, an NAPWD resthouse (camp sites Rs 50, d standard/VIP Rs 300/500) has a couple of rooms.

Getting There & Away

Chalt-bound minibuses depart in the early morning from lower Khazana (Bank) Rd in Gilgit for about Rs 50, returning the next morning between 6am and 9am.

CHALT TO GHULMET

Near Chalt, the KKH runs along the edge of the ‘Asian Plate’, into which the Indian subcontinent ploughed 50 million years ago, creating the Himalayan chain. There’s no simple line, but roughly speaking Asia is to the north and the remnants of a chain of volcanic islands trapped between Asia and India are to the south (see the boxed text, p64).

Eastwards the KKH arches around fertile Sikanderabad. Scratched into the walls hun-
dreds of metres high on the north side of the
valley is the ‘road’ that was once Hunza’s link
to the outside.

At Nilt are the ravine and the site of the
fort where the 1891 British invasion nearly
stalled. East of Nilt in Thol (pronounced tole)
is a green-roofed shrine to Shah Wali, a Shiite
preacher from Afghanistan who settled here
in the late 18th century.

At several points on the road there are
splendid views of Rakaposhi, culminating
in Ghulmet (not to be confused with Gulmit
village in Gojal). At the east end of Ghulmet is
touristy Ghulmet Nala, above which
Rakaposhi rises in an unobscured sweep. Take
tea, take in the view and peruse the shops selling crystals and 9/11 commemorative carpets
from Peshawar. Up the nala is a base camp for
a 1979 Japanese assault on Rakaposhi. The
views are outstanding, but it’s a long slog with
no water and poor camping. The trail begins
behind the hamlet of Yal, east of the nala.

Sleeping & Eating
In Ghulmet there are several bright and tacky
places crowded around the KKH bridge
over Ghulmet Nala offering refreshments
and accommodation.

Rakaposhi View Point (05821-59163; camping Rs
50-100) Offers a few camp sites next to the busy
restaurant (mains Rs 100 to Rs 200) with col-
ourful umbrellas, picnic tables and gift shop.
Rakaposhi View Café & Camping Side (05821-
59122; camping Rs 50-100) Choose from dusty camp
sites up top or better secluded sites under the trees below. Provides a night security guard for campers.

Rakaposhi Paradise Hotel (05821-58146; d Rs 400-700) Has two good doubles, plus a couple of dark and dingy cheaper rooms.

MINAPIN

From Pisan, just 2km east of Ghulmet, there’s a turn-off to Minapin, 5km further east. Sleepy Minapin is a popular place for travelers to ditch their packs and contemplate the mountains. It is also the base for numerous day walks and the start of an excellent trek to another Rakaposhi base camp and longer treks towards Diran Peak (see p351).

The best accommodation is provided by Diran Hotel (05821-58149; diranhotel@yahoo.com; camp sites/dm Rs 100, s/d Rs 300-1200), in a walled orchard east of a large mosque. Rooms vary in comfort and size, and prices vary with the seasons, but you are sure to find something that suits. The excellent restaurant (mains Rs 50 to Rs 350) has several tasty local specialities, such as chicken gorkon, cooked in a traditional stone pot. Trekking guides and porters and jeep safaris can all be organised at the hotel, where you can also find information on short walks.

West of the hotel is a NAPWD resthouse (d Rs 300). Keep an eye out for a new camping ground in Minapin village, which was planned by Israr, the very popular former manager of the Diran Hotel (erstwhile Diran Guesthouse).

Getting There & Away

Minibuses depart Minapin (behind the NAPWD resthouse) for Gilgit after about 6am, and come to Minapin from lower Khazana (Bank) Rd in Gilgit around 1pm to 2pm (Rs 70, Rs 10 for baggage). Minibuses depart Aliabad around 11am from near the Swat Hotel and return to Aliabad (Rs 30) from in front of the Diran Hotel (listen for the tooting horn). Alternatively, you can flag down a minibus on the KKH at Pisan.

ALIABAD

05821

Aliabad’s characterless bazaar, strung out for 1.5km along the KKH, is a transport hub and administrative centre. It’s an awkward base unless you’re trekking in Hassanabad Nala.

Orientation & Information

A small telephone exchange is in the centre. The post office is at the east end, 200m past the petrol station. A link road to Karimabad joins the KKH 2km west of the bazaar.

Sleeping & Eating

There are three foreigner-friendly hotels bunched together near the ‘Gilgit 100km’ road marker. The best is the Hunza Continental Hotel (0355401086; s/d Rs 400/500) with rooms equipped with TVs and clean bathrooms. Hunza Gateway Hotel (55202; s/d Rs 200/300) is a more basic option and, up the nearby laneway, the Dumani Hotel (55202; d Rs 250) is barely adequate.

Getting There & Away

Get here from Gilgit on any Karimabad-bound transport. Minibuses leave Aliabad for Gilgit (Rs 90) and Sost (Rs 90) all day, starting as early as 5am and leaving when full. Suzuki go all day to/from Ganish (Rs 5) and Karimabad (Rs 10). To catch northbound transport, Aliabad is a better choice than Ganish as minibuses tend to leave Aliabad when full.
Natco (50111), with an office and depot at the north end of the bazaar, has minibuses to Gilgit (Rs 100) departing at 8am, 1pm and 6pm; the service to Sost (Rs 100) via Gulmit (Rs 30) and Passu (Rs 35) leaves at 11am. If there are seats available, you could hop on the bus to Kashgar (Rs 2700) at about 8am, which originated in Gilgit.

KARIMABAD (BALTIT) 05821 / elevation 2438m

Baltit is Hunza’s ancient capital. Its magnificent fort, on a throne-like ridge with Ultar Nala yawning behind it, has always been the kingdom’s focal point. The fort served as the royal palace for over 750 years until last century when sounder quarters were built below in what came to be called Karimabad. The name is now also used for Baltit and the complex of ancient tribal hamlets around it.

Since the arrival of KKH tourism and overseas aid, Karimabad has prospered and the bazaar has filled with hotels, restaurants, travel agencies and handicraft shops. The superb setting, grand fort, good food, friendly locals and opportunity to swap tales with other highway travellers make Karimabad an ideal stopover.

Orientation

Karimabad is perched high above the KKH. Vehicle access from the KKH includes New Ganish Rd to the lower end of the bazaar from just west of Ganish, and a road to the

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Ultar Channel..................... 1

KKH (1km)

To Ganish (1km)
top of the bazaar from just west of Aliabad. Old Ganish Rd, the original access road from Ganish, is now a footpath.

**Information**

**BOOKSHOPS**
- **Ali Book Stall** (57112; Café de Hunza, Hilltop Bazaar) Stocks books and maps of the NA, plus carpets.
- **Baltit Book Centre** (Bazaar) A respectable collection of NA and Central Asia books in English.
- **Mohummond Book Store** (57040; Bazaar) Plenty of books on the local area plus a range of Lonely Planet guides.

**EMERGENCY**
If you need to make an emergency phone call anywhere in the world, Café de Hunza has a satellite telephone available.

**Hospital** (Old Ganish Rd)

**Police** There is usually a police presence at Zero Point, below Darbar Hunza Hotel.

**INTERNET ACCESS**
Both branches of Café de Hunza (Zero Point and Hilltop Bazaar) should have connections (per hour Rs 50) by the time you read this.

**Kado Internet Services** (Zero Point; per hr Rs 40; 10am-10pm) Plenty of monitors, CD burning (Rs 40) and scanning.

**MONEY**
- **Alam Money Changer** (Lower Bazaar; 8am-8pm) Has better cash rates and accepts most currencies.
- **National Bank** (New Ganish Rd; 9am-1pm Mon-Thu, 9am-noon Fri & Sat) Accepts US dollars and UK pounds cash or travellers cheques.

**POST**
- **Post office** (9am-4pm Mon-Thu, 9am-12.30pm Fri & Sat) Located along the back road to Aliabad, about 700m northwest of the bazaar’s centre.

**TELEPHONE**
- **Telephone Exchange** (Old Ganish Rd; 24hr)

**TRAVEL AGENCIES**
- **Adventure Hunza** (57201; www.adventurehunza.com; Mountain Equipment, Baltit Fort Rd) The Karim brothers can help organise short and long treks and have equipment for sale and hire.
- **Concordia Expeditions** (57182; www.concordia-expeditions.com) A well-known trekking and touring agency across the road from Hill Top Hotel.
- **Hunza Guides Pakistan** (57076; www.hgp.com.pk; Zero Point) Trekking and cultural tours.

**Travel Walji’s** (57203; www.waljis.com; Zero Point) Tours and jeep hire with good drivers.

**Sights & Activities**

**BALTIT FORT**
The oldest parts of **Baltit Fort** (57110; admission Rs 300, plus camera Rs 150; 9am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Apr-Oct, 9.30am-4pm Nov-Mar) date from the 13th century.

Over the years more houses and towers were added, and it was fortified. To cement an alliance with Baltistan’s Maqpon dynasty in the 17th century, Mir Ayesho II (great-grandson of the legendary Girkis) married a daughter of the Balti ruler, who sent artisans to build a fort at nearby Altit. The princess then came to live in Hunza, bringing her own artisans to improve Baltit Fort. Balti-style renovation continued under the reign of Ayesho II’s son. The name Baltit probably dates from this time.

The fort took on its present appearance only in the last century or so. Mir Nazim Khan added outer walls and fixed up his own rooms with wallpaper, drapes, fireplaces, balconies and tinted windows. He had the outer walls whitewashed, dramatically raising the fort’s visual impact from all over the valley. Also added were a rooftop dais, where royal councils were held in good weather, and the ‘lantern’ or skylight.

Nazim Khan’s grandson moved to modern quarters in Karimabad in 1945. By the time KKH travellers first saw the fort in the 1980s it was an abandoned shell, stripped of anything of value and verging on collapse.

From 1990 to 1996 it was effectively taken apart stone by stone and reassembled. This was a painstaking effort using advanced preservation principles developed in Europe, while retaining the unique construction and earthquake-proofing techniques pioneered by the fort’s original builders.

The result is impressive and the renovation work almost invisible. Several rooms have exhibits of clothing and old photos, plus utensils and furnishings donated by local people. Visitors get a half-hour tour with a knowledgeable local guide (you cannot go in without one), and interested persons can use the library.

Tickets are sold at a small kiosk below the fort and it is worth noting that the fort’s administration is funded solely by these ticket sales.
CHANNEL WALKS
A three- or four-hour walk along the main water channels from Ultar Nala is a good way to see Hunza at its best. Try to avoid the delicate side channels.

Climb past the polo ground, bearing left beside the channel there. The path goes down the valley all the way to Hyderabad Nala. There, scramble down to the link road and turn back towards Karimabad. You can soon drop to a lower channel that goes all the way back. You can go right on around Karimabad, past Mominabad to the headworks behind Baltit Fort, although the channel goes underground for part of the way.

Both these channels and the newer, higher channels distribute water from Ultar. There are seven channels running to the west and five to the east from Ultar Nala. The velvety appearance of Ultar water is the result of minute flakes of mica.

QUEEN VICTORIA MONUMENT
There is a ‘monument’ to Queen Victoria at the top of the rock face behind Karimabad, probably erected by Nazim Khan, and it can be reached in an hour from Baltit. Take the channel path above the polo ground. Five minutes out, cross the channel and climb stone steps beside an old watchtower. At the top of the village, scramble over to a shallow cleft with some very large boulders. Go straight up to the base of the cliff before crossing over to the monument; avoid a diagonal crossing of the face because the top Ultar water channel spills down it. In Burushaski, the monument is called Malikamu Shikari (ma-li-ka-mu shi-ka-ri).

MOMINABAD
In the NA there are traces of an ancient caste system, in which musicians and artisans ranked low. In the past they were often segregated in their own separate villages. Though it’s quite ordinary looking, Mominabad (old name Berishal), near a turn on the Ganish–Karimabad road, was such a village. Its people even speak their own dialect, Berishki.

Sleeping
BUDGET
Tourist Cottage (Zero Point; d Rs 200) This basic option is owned by the brother of the owner of Haider Inn and you should inspect the room and the plumbing before settling in.

Karimabad Hotel ( @ 57108; Zero Point; d Rs 50/150/200) The Karimabad’s new rooms overlooking the NAPWD resthouse are good value with great views and working plumbing. The owners are friendly and the restaurant is OK.

Hunza Inn ( @ 57186; Zero Point; d Rs 70/200/250) Word of mouth up and down the KKH keeps this little place humming even in the lean shoulder seasons. Rooms are simple but clean and comfortable with bathrooms with hot water. There’s a congenial host and the wholesome and cheap communal dinners (see opposite) are open to nonguests and are a great way to gather information.

Haider Inn ( @ 57758; Zero Point; d Rs 75/200/250) This is one of the original hotels in Hunza and the friendly owner is happy to show you the one-room original Hunza Inn and the original travellers’ menu. There was plenty of renovation under way at the time of research to add a restaurant. The rooms vary but overall are good value.

Lucky Star Hotel (d Rs 300) Housed in the old post office, the spartan rooms have bathrooms with hot water. It’s centrally located with a restaurant upstairs and a good hot-snack café downstairs.

Rainbow Hotel ( @ 57114; d Rs 300-400) The Rainbow is not welcoming, with glum rooms with bathrooms upstairs and even glummer rooms downstairs that share a bathroom.

Garden Lodge ( @ 57168; dRs 100/400) The best feature here is the quiet garden where you may be able to negotiate a camp site, as well as a few basic rooms that are adequately clean and habitable.

Hotel Blue Moon ( @ 57325; d without/with view Rs 400/600) The small rooms have new bedding which makes them better than the average, but the precarious stairways don’t impress, and neither do the tiny bathrooms. There are great views from the pleasant rear garden, however, revealing the hotel’s, and for that matter Karimabad’s, precarious position.

Karim Hotel ( @ 57091; d Rs 250/450) Rooms are reasonable and the food OK. The best feature is the sunny patio with fine views of the mountains above and the street life below.

Mulberry Inn ( @ 57178; camping Rs 80, dRs 100/400/600) The friendly staff at Mulberry Inn keep the basic, fan-cooled rooms very clean and campers can enjoy a hot shower. There’s an OK restaurant and a rooftop barbecue in summer. If you are in luck the man-
ager’s mother will cook up some homemade Hunza dishes.

**MIDRANGE & TOP END**

**Tourist Park Hotel** (57087; s/d Rs 300/600) Has a warren of rooms, some better than others, around a quiet courtyard garden. It’s worth inspecting a few and making an offer. The restaurant can be good, with Hunza specialities made by arrangement.

**World Roof Hotel** (57153; r Rs 300, s/d with balcony Rs 600/800; ) The comfortable double rooms with balcony have great views and satellite TV; the budget rooms are not as appealing. There’s a decent multicuisine restaurant and a rooftop with views and occasional barbecues.

**Hill Top Hotel** (57129; s/d Rs 800/1000) Hill Top, with its wide verandas and manicured garden, has a relaxed, welcoming atmosphere. The rooms with views are good value and so is the restaurant. The early- and late-season discounts make this an even better choice.

**Hunza View Hotel** (57141; hunzaview@kado.net.pk; s/d standard Rs 1000/1200, s/d deluxe Rs 1400/1600) Situated below the telephone exchange, Hunza View has rooms with satellite TV and valley views and, with its souvenir shop, is geared for groups. It has a good restaurant, but presents a long uphill walk to the bazaar.

**Hotel Hunza Embassy** (57001; www.hunzaembassy.com; Zero Point; s/d standard Rs 1500/2000, s/d deluxe Rs 2000/3000) This hotel was recently refurbished and is looking splendid with lots of carved wood softening the concrete construction. Both standard and deluxe rooms are spacious, clean and comfortable. The deluxe rooms have a bathtub and the excellent restaurant serves several delicious Hunza dishes in addition to the usual multicuisine.

**Hunza Baltit Inn** (57012; Zero Point; s/d Rs 2500/3000) The attractive and low-key Hunza Baltit Inn is managed by the very professional Serena Hotels group. The spotless rooms are surprisingly tiny but do have TV and first-rate bathrooms and share a sunny balcony from which to take in the view across to Baltit Fort. The rooms have either double or twin beds. There’s a large and popular restaurant here, as well as a Hunza-decorated room for traditional dining. Breakfast is included in the tariff.

**Darbar Hunza Hotel** (57105; www.hunzadarbar.com.pk; Zero Point; s/d Rs 3000/4000) This conspicuous hotel has wonderful views from the lobby, restaurant and roof down the valley. The 40 spacious rooms, some with double beds, have TV, phone and bathrooms, but unfortunately are not in brilliant condition. There’s a hugely overpriced bar for foreigners (US$10 for a Corona imported from Europe!), and when we were there, the restaurant and service compared well only to Fawlty Towers.

**Eating**

**RESTAURANTS**

Nearly all hotels have restaurants roughly in line with room quality; even the most basic of them can produce chicken curry, dhal, rice and boiled potatoes. Relatively cheap Chinese beer finds its way to a couple of general stores and hotel restaurants and is worth asking for.

**Hunza Inn** (57186; 3-course veg/nonveg dinner Rs 70/90) Simple and generous local and international-style dinners are held in a friendly communal atmosphere. If you’re not staying here, book dinner in the morning.

**Hidden Paradise** (57464; mains Rs 80-180; 9am-9pm) This quaint restaurant has a big menu of inexpensive and delicious Hunza dishes; eg *haneetze doudo* (apricot soup; Rs 60) and *chapshu*ro (Hunza pizza; Rs 150). The cuisine is definitely not haute, but this is a great way to sample local food with friends and enjoy views of Altit and Duikar.

**Baltit Café & View Point** (03355401620; mains Rs 80-220) The main selling point here is the pleasant garden dining area with excellent views. Find a sunny or shady seat and sip a cold drink or tuck into the soups, burgers, snacks and several Pakistani and Chinese dishes.

**Hunza Baltit Inn** (57012; Zero Point; mains Rs 80-300) The premier hotel restaurant in Karimabad has tasty renditions of Pakistani, Chinese and Continental cuisine, but in particular we recommend the Pakistani dishes such as the delicious chicken and ginger *handi* (Rs 290).

**Hotel Hunza Embassy** (57001; www.hunzaembassy.com; Zero Point; mains Rs 90-200) This is another good place to seek out Hunza cuisine: try *hoilo garma* (spinach pasta) and *burutz berikut*z (chapati stuffed with fresh cheese, carrot tops, spring onions, coriander and mint). There’s also an extensive multicuisine menu.

**CAFÉS & QUICK EATS**

**Lucky Star Hotel** (mains Rs 25-35) Most appealing for its Rs 10 snacks (Hunza doughnuts, pakoras and samosas) and tea, Lucky Star nevertheless serves inexpensive curries including dhal, chapati and veg curry (Rs 35).
HUNZA CUISINE
Meals in Hunza include the likes of potatoes, rice, wholemeal bread and noodle soup, with oil and spices used sparingly. But there’s more to Hunza cooking than that, as you’ll see if you’re lucky enough to be invited home for dinner.

Milk products include milk (mamu), yogurt and diltar, a cultured buttermilk. A soft cheese called burus is soothing for upset stomachs. Yogurt and burus are available by request at some hotels. Kurut is a sour, hard cheese; you’re most likely to get this from shepherds in exchange for things like tea, salt or sugar.

Pitti is thick whole-wheat bread baked in coals. Chapshuro is ‘Hunza pizza’: meat, tomatoes and onions traditionally cooked into a thick chapati but sometimes just sandwiched between two chapatis and fried. Burushapik (‘cheese-chapati’) is burus cooked into a whole-wheat chapati, the outside covered in apricot-kernel oil, and served cold – good and very filling. Burutze berikutz is similar but with herbs (coriander and mint) added and served in small pieces.

Doudo is a noodle soup with vegetables, thickened with egg and whole-wheat flour. It comes in many varieties, eg kurutze dudo, with kurut; and delicious haneetzee dudo, with nuts or crushed apricot kernels, garlic and onion. Apricot soup is made from dried apricots, flour and water.

Most of the Northern Areas’ dried fruit comes from Hunza, and dried Hunza apricots are found in bazaars all over Asia. Apricots and mulberries usually ripen by June. Peaches, plums, apples, grapes, cherries and walnuts appear in early autumn. Dried mulberries make a marvelous travel snack.

Among drinks is a tea brewed from tumuro (or chumuru), a wild alpine herb similar to sage that is said to cool and clear the head, especially at high elevation. Despite Islamic prohibition and disapproval from the Aga Khan, some Hunzakuts carry on pre-Muslim traditions by brewing a rough grape wine called mel, and a potent mulberry firewater called arak. Arak (‘Hunza water’) may be offered to you by friends, though your stomach may not be up for the ride. Some shops also sell nonalcoholic Pakistani beer.

Café de Hunza I ( 57112; Hilltop Bazaar; breakfast Rs 55-90, cakes Rs 25-50, coffee Rs 40-75; 7.30am-late; )
The KKH has delivered espresso coffee (Rs 75) to sip while munching on Hunza walnut cake (Rs 50) and reading the newspaper (albeit two days old). Not surprisingly, this venture, which also does muesli and omelette breakfasts and sells books and souvenirs, has hit the spot with travellers and there’s now another branch at Zero Point.

SELF-CATERING
Self-caterers will find fresh fruit and vegetables less plentiful here than in Gilgit.

Saghin Departmental Store has a reasonable selection of canned and packaged food, batteries, film and toiletries. Baltit Bakery will often have pitti (whole-wheat bread). General stores and bakeries are also good places to search for dried fruit, snacks and trekking supplies.

Entertainment
Traditional dances are occasionally performed for tour groups at the midrange hotels by local musicians and artists. It is worthwhile seeking an invitation to these events – you will probably be more than welcome to bolster the audience and you might even get an offering of local wine. Hunza’s drum and surnai (a kind of oboe) music is called hareep: there are different versions for weddings, festivals, polo matches and other events.

Shopping
The bazaar is lined with art and handicraft shops, such as Hunza Carpet, many selling the woollen wares made by local women trained by the Threadnet Hunza programme. Hunza-Nagyr wool is renowned for its durability, though it’s being displaced by factory imitations. Hunza Art Museum is another reliable store, and can provide guarantee certificates for semiprecious stones and gems.

Kado Gems Cutting & Polishing Centre (www.rc-hunza.org) The follow-up project to Threadnet Hunza is designed to empower local women, in this case by training them in gem cutting, polishing and selling. At the time of research the finishing touches were being put on the shop which will eventually sparkle with rubies, sapphire, topaz and quartz.
**Karakoram Highway**

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**Hunza & Nagyr •• Around Karimabad**

**Hayat Silversmith** (Bazaar) This one-man operation can turn your stones into jewellery.

**Hunzo-e-Hayan** (Hunarmand Market) The small shop front for Shafqet Karim, an artisan who turns wooden bowls and carves soup spoons and other traditional implements as well as figurines.

**Mountain Equipment** (57201) Trekking and mountaineering equipment can be purchased here at the top end of the bazaar. The lads from Adventure Hunza have also opened a CD shop here, Kiran Audio Video Centre.

**Getting There & Around**

Minibuses to Gilgit (Rs 100) scout Karimabad bazaar between 6.30am and 7am in search of passengers. After 7am, you may need to head down to Aliabad to easily catch one of the many minibuses (Rs 90) heading south. The most convenient transport to Sost (Rs 90) is also found at Aliabad. You could also try Ganish, but buses tend to fill up at Aliabad first.

Passenger Suzukis drive through the bazaar and then do an Aliabad–Karimabad–Ganish loop all day for Rs 10.

**AROUND KARIMABAD**

**Ualtar Meadow**

A climb to the beautiful Ualtar icefall with its amphitheatre of peaks including the 6000m pinnacle, Bubulimating, or Lady Finger, will give you an appreciation for the vertical lie of the land. This can be a strenuous day trip or an easier overnight one; see p353 for details of the walk.

Remember to carry water! Some people hire a local guide for around Rs 500 per day: useful but not essential. But going alone is not recommended; several solo hikers have disappeared and others have been injured.

**Altit Fort & Village**

This picturesque fort overlooking the village of Altit (admission Rs 100) beside the Hunza River was undergoing extensive renovation at the time of research and was closed to the public. The 1000-year-old village has been renovated and rehabilitated and you can be walked around the charming village with the aid of a local guide. The fort is about 1.5km from Karimabad. Turn right after the jamaat khana (Ismaili community hall) and pass the old village pool to the fort gate. Fort is gela (geh-lah) in Burushaski.

**Duikar**

At about 2800m, Duikar is said to be Hunza’s highest village. It is about 11km and 25 minutes by jeep or a 2½-hour walk from Karimabad, past gravity-defying terraced fields. The rewards include immense valley views and a great hotel. From the strangely eroded hill behind Eagle’s Nest Hotel you can look down on the Hunza River, the twisting ribbon of the KKH and the Legoland of Altit village; or look across to Rakaposhi and Golden Peak (Diran Peak is hidden from view); and up to Bubulimating. Sunrise and sunset are magnificent. There are even better views from Khosht, a promontory leaning out over Ualtar Meadow and the glacier, and a five-hour round trip from Duikar.

**Sleeping & Eating**

For many years Altit’s popular Kisar Inn provided everything that KKH travellers needed, but with the recent decline in tourism this hotel has, at least temporarily, closed its doors. Inquiries about if/when it will reopen should be directed to the Eagle’s Nest Hotel.

**Sky Camping Site & Restaurant** (05821-58420; camping Rs 50, dm Rs 200) This option has beds in tents set up in a potato field. There are two cold-water bathrooms and room to pitch your own tent. The restaurant (mains Rs 100 to Rs 220) is a couple of tables under an umbrella! The view, of course, is sublime.

**Eagle’s Nest Hotel** (05821-58274; www.eaglesnesthotel.com; s/d from Rs 800/2000, ste Rs 2500-3500) Nearby, Duikar’s Eagle Nest has stupendous views from all its comfortable rooms plus first-rate Hunza food. It’s open from March to the end of October and can organise transfers from Karimabad. It’s popular, so ring to see if there’s room. The restaurant (mains Rs 100 to Rs 220) has Hunza, Pakistani and Chinese dishes and generous buffets. Breakfast is included in the tariff.

**Getting There & Away**

Tracks run to Altit from Karimabad bazaar and from New Ganish Rd. The turn for Duikar is just before Altit, a 20-minute walk from Karimabad bazaar. Eagle’s Nest Hotel has a booking office in Karimabad, opposite Hidden Paradise restaurant, where accommodation and transfers can be organised. A hired jeep from Karimabad to Duikar is Rs 1000. Morning Suzukis run between Altit and Ganish/Aliabad.
GANISH
The people of Ganish used to be famous for their raids against Nagyr. In the 19th century this was Hunza’s main stronghold against Ismailism, and today it’s an integrated Shiite-Ismail community. It’s Hunza-Nagyr’s oldest settlement with an ancient village centre bursting with rejuvenated classic Hunza architecture. Travellers who show respect for the villagers will be overwhelmed with hospitality and rewarded with a rich cultural experience.

Ganish Village ☎ 05821
The restoration of Ganish village (admission Rs 150, plus camera Rs 50) is particularly good and won a Unesco Asia Pacific Heritage Award. While Baltit Fort shows how the cream of society lived, Ganish shows another side of traditional Hunza life. Behind a shaded, tranquil tank are several richly carved wooden mosques, 100 to 200 years old, the restoration of which clinched the award. Legend has it that Ganish warriors practised their river-crossing techniques in the tank before crossing the Hunza River to attack Nagyr villages. The timber-and-stone watchtower from the days of war with Nagyr is a tight squeeze but worth the climb. Particularly interesting is the use of the cool glacier meltwater to store food – it’s still done today. Butter is wrapped in birch bark and can be stored under water for years! You may even be offered a sweet made from the butter. For all its quaintness and award-winning restoration, Ganish is not a museum (there is a local museum under construction) but a living village. This is exemplified perhaps by the huge concrete Imamia complex being constructed beside the walled village. The Imambara is expected to be clad in wooden carvings which may help it blend in.

If no-one is staffing the admission booth, walk towards the village and someone will find you.

The Sacred Rocks at Hunza
About 1.5km east on the KKH at a place called Haldekush are several stony rises. The rocks, with pictures and inscriptions from as early as the 1st century, are a ‘guest book’ of the valley. In addition to local traditions, they tell of Buddhist pilgrims, kings of the Kushan empire, a 6th-century Chinese ambassador, 8th-century Tibetan conquerors and even KKH workers.

Sleeping & Eating
Karakoram Highway Inn (☎ 57200; KKH, Ganish; s/d Rs 400/600) This hotel was being renovated at the time of research. It will need to be a good job to justify these prices in this location.
PTDC Hunza Motel (☎ 57069; KKH, Garelt; s/d Rs 1350/1650, s/d deluxe Rs 1950/2250) This motel is not very conveniently situated in Garelt, 1.5km west of Ganish along the KKH. The spacious rooms with modern bathrooms enjoy wonderful views. There’s a good restaurant, garden and information service.

Getting There & Away
Aliabad-based minibuses scout for passengers to Gilgit around 5am to 6am. Northbound minibuses may have filled up in Aliabad before departing. Passenger Suzukis ply between here and Aliabad for Rs 10.

UPPER NAGYR
That part of Nagyr visible from Karimabad is strung along a jeep road from the Hassanabad-Shayar suspension bridge up to the glaciers at Hoper. Much of it is in the shadow of its own peaks, giving it a slightly gloomy atmosphere. The location also gives Nagyr heavier snow and more water.

Orientation & Information
Opposite Ganish, the Nagyr (also called Hispar) River joins the Hunza River. About 12km upsteam this valley divides, south to Hoper Nala and southeast to remote Hispar Nala. There’s a paved road from the KKH east of Ganish up the northeast side of the Nagyr River. Although it is paved, this road is prone to landslide damage and blockage. The road crosses the river to enter the village of Nagyr and continues to Hoper, while a track continues on the northeast bank to Hispar. There’s a secondary jeep road from Hassanabad to Hoper. A tenuous track also runs along the south bank of the Hunza River from Shayar to Minapin.

Shayar to Nagyr Village
There’s a precipitous down-and-up at the Hassanabad-Shayar suspension bridge, followed by a fairly level two-hour walk on to Sumayar, then a two-hour climb to Nagyr. This area has few of the conveniences found along the KKH. Askur Das has a teashop and small restaurant.

Camping is not advisable near Sumayar, but it’s good in the meadows three hours up
Sumayar Nala, with views of 7270m Diran and the Silkiang Glacier. A footpath leaves the jeep track near a powerhouse, initially following the channel. In the afternoon after freezing nights there is a rockfall hazard in the nala.

Nagyr village was the capital of the old state of Nagyr, and descendants of the mir still live here. It has a hospital, a friendly police post (where you will need to register) and a few basic shops and restaurants, as well as an NAPWD resthouse (d Rs 300).

Hoper
The area from Nagyr village to Hoper looks fertile and lovely in spring. Hoper (or Hopar) is a cluster of villages around a natural bowl at a bend of the Bualtar Glacier, 19km from the KKH. Opposite Hoper, the Bualtar, also known as Hoper Glacier, is joined by the white Barpu Glacier. From here, you can hike beside the Bualtar or cross it and climb to summer villages along both glaciers. This is also a base for treks into the high, glacier-draped peaks called the Hispar Muztagh (see p352).

At the end of the road are a couple of basic hotels. Hoper Hilton Inn (☎ 05821-58083; camping Rs 60, s/d Rs 300/600) is probably the pick with six rooms with hot water and a restaurant (set dinner Rs 300) with a communal table and a TV. Hoper Hilton (camping Rs 30, r Rs 300) is even more basic. Either of these hotels can help find porters or guides for day walks and longer treks.

Getting There & Away
A daily minibus runs between Hoper and Gilgit (Rs 150) and Aliabad (Rs 50), departing at 7am. The return bus departs Gilgit at noon. A hired jeep is about Rs 1500 for the return trip from Karimabad, and Rs 4000 from Gilgit. Cargo jeeps occasionally go in via Hassanabad to Sumayar and via Ganish to Nagyr village, heading back early the next morning.

On foot from Karimabad via Ganish, Nagyr village is about three hours and Hoper five to six hours. From Hassanabad via Shayar, Hoper is a very long day’s walk.

GOJAL & THE KHUNJERAB PASS

The Khunjerab and Ghujerab Rivers merge below the Khunjerab Pass to form the Hunza River, the only stream to cut across the high spine of the Karakoram. It does so in Gojal (the still-used historical name for the region commonly described as ‘upper Hunza’), which extends from the pass to where the river turns west into ‘Hunza proper’. The High Karakoram is consequently more accessible here than anywhere else on the KKH. The Hunza River picks its way among great fans of alluvium carried down by smaller streams, and most villages are built on these fertile deposits. At Passu and Gulmit, several major glaciers reach nearly to the Highway.

‘The scenery is stern and impressive, but too gloomy and harsh to be really sublime’, wrote the British explorer Reginald Schomberg in 1935. Mountains with razor-edge summits and bare walls drop sheer to the river, and the wind drives up the valley even on brilliant days. The clearest and most storm-free weather is in early autumn, and if you’re fit, this is the place to trek and get a feeling for the mountains and its inhabitants.

Most Gojalis are Wakhi Tajik (one of seven Tajik tribes in Central Asia), descendants of nomadic herders from Afghanistan, and Ismaili Muslims. Traditionally they have depended on the raising of sheep and yaks, and to a lesser extent on cropping. They’re certainly the most warm-hearted people on the KKH, with easy greetings and hospitality for both male and female visitors.

Depending on whom you ask, khun jerab is Wakhi for either Valley of Blood or Valley of the Khan. The broad Khunjerab Pass was for centuries used by Kyrgyz and Tajik herders, until Hunza raiders hounded them out in the late 18th century, after which Hunza’s rulers declared the area to be ‘royal’ pasturelands – so either version fits.

A steady trickle of horseback commerce crossed the Khunjerab (Chinese: Hongqilapu) until the 1950s, when China–Pakistan hostilities closed the border. By the mid-1960s, the two countries had made amends and set to work on a road over the pass. ‘Khunjerab Top’ (4730m) was opened to official traffic and trade in 1982, and to tourists in 1986, though intrepid travellers had already discovered it.

The crossing is not only between countries and between watersheds (rivers flow north into the Tarim Basin and south to the Arabian Sea), but also between two of the world’s major mountain ranges, the Pamir and the Karakoram. In the 2½ hours from Sost to Pirali, the transition is evident from the deep,
angular gorge of the Khunjerab River to the rounded Pamir valleys.

**GULMIT**

© 05822 / elevation 2700m

With a library, a museum and the mir’s traditional second home, Gulmit (gool-mit) is the closest thing to a town in Gojal, and is its unofficial capital. It’s very picturesque in spring and early summer when the fruit trees bloom, and again in autumn when the orchards glow red, orange and yellow. There are many great treks here, including a number of fine day walks.

The village is centred on its old polo ground, 700m off the KKH, though several hotels and the National Bank are down on the Highway. The telephone exchange and police station are 3km south of the village chowk (marketplace) on the KKH.

**Sights & Activities**

**CULTURAL MUSEUM**

A unique collection of Hunza history is packed into the dusty Cultural Museum (admission Rs 30): utensils, musical instruments, a stuffed snow leopard, gems and firearms, including the matchlock gun said to have injured the British commander at the Battle of Nilt in 1891. If it’s not open, ask at the nearby Hunza Marco Polo Inn (see opposite).

**OLD GULMIT**

The mir’s palace (under restoration) is at the northern end of the polo ground. Until the early ’70s the mir of Hunza lived here for three months of the year, presiding over local durbars (councils). A cluster of houses to the left of the palace is the original village. The tallest of these is said to be Gulmit’s oldest, possibly 200 years old; before the palace was built the mir stayed in it on his Gulmit sojourns. To its left are the carved lintels of an old Shiite mosque from the early 19th century, before Gojalis converted to Ismailism. You can also see local women dyeing and weaving traditional cloth in the old building next to the palace. The Threadnet Hunza programme has finished now that the ladies have a viable industry. You may be able to purchase items here, but most of the handiwork goes to shops in Karimabad (see p304).
**WALKS**

The day walks or hikes that follow can be done with minimal gear and no assistance. If you want a guide, any able-bodied Gulmiti will be able to help (see p337 for advice on hiring guides).

**Kamaris, Andra Fort & Gulmit Glacier**

A twisting track behind Gulmit climbs for an hour to friendly Kamaris village, with views up and down the valley. A half-hour walk northeast from Kamaris brings you to the ruins of Andra Fort, built about 200 years ago to defend Gulmit in Hunza’s struggles with neighbouring Nagyr. Ask local people for Andra Gelah (geh-la).

The track continues past Kamaris for another hour, northwest to the base of the Gulmit Glacier. A long day or overnight option is to continue on the footpath along the south side of the glacier, an area known locally as Zherav, where there are some shepherds’ huts. Stay away on windy or rainy days, when rockfall hazard is high.

**Gulmit Village**

From Kamaris, a footpath crosses the stream below Gulmit Glacier, then becomes a jeep track up to Gulmit village, and returns to the KKH. The loop from Gulmit takes four to five hours.

**Borit Lake & Beyond**

From Gulmit, a path crosses the Gulmit Glacier to Borit Lake, two hours away. It’s 1.25km across the glacier, the way marked by a cairn on the south moraine and a big cleft or dip in the north moraine. The crossing can be tricky; consider spending a few rupees to get someone in Gulmit to show you across. Alternatively, the lake is about five hours (12km) from Gulmit via Kamaris.

Above the lake, Borith Lake Hotel offers simple meals and basic accommodation from May to September. Some travellers have found it closed during these months, so don’t count on it being open.

A long and strenuous day trip above Borit Lake takes you to Borit Sar, the ridge between the Gulkin and Passu Glaciers, with awesome, nearly 360-degree views of these glaciers and the Batura Muztagh. There’s no water on the way.

A return option from the lake is simply to walk half an hour down the jeep road to the KKH and hitch back. The lake also makes a good stop on a walk between Gulmit and Passu – about 15km (four hours).

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Gulmit Continental Hotel** (50254; s/d Rs 150/300)

Out on the link road, the Gulmit Continental, formerly Shatuber Inn, has excellent-value doubles – too cheap to last and perhaps reflecting the recent change of management and name. A challenging set of stairs leads to the Tupopdan Restaurant (mains Rs 50 to Rs 105), where a few Gojali dishes feature among the usual multicuisine fare.

**Village Guesthouse** (camping Rs 50, s/d Rs 400/600)

By the polo ground, with a large walled garden, this place can be good value, though some doubles have shared toilet and iffy hot shower and all can be a bit stuffy. It may be hard to find the caretaker initially but you eventually will.

**Hunza Marco Polo Inn** (50227; www.marco poloiingulmit.com; old wing s/d Rs 1400/1500, new wing s/d Rs 2500/3000)

This hotel boasts an attractive garden and a knowledgeable and helpful host. The rooms in the old wing are quite comfortable.

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**GULMIT**

![Gulmit Village Map](image-url)
but those in the new wing (under construction at the time of research) will have central heating, bathtubs, telephones and ‘eventually’ satellite TV and internet connectivity. The new wing also houses the grand restaurant (mains Rs 120 to Rs 300), which can be recommended for its spring water and other liquid refreshments. There are interconnected rooms for families and a discount can usually be negotiated.

Silk Route Lodge (☏ 50229; www.silkroutelodge.com; s/d Rs 1800/2000) Geared for tour groups, the carpeted rooms are comfortable with tiled bathrooms and plenty of hot water. There are million-dollar views from the balconied top-floor rooms and a proficient restaurant (with mains from Rs 70 to Rs 260) that handles Continental dishes and curries with aplomb.

Gulmit Tourist Inn (☏ 50230) Fully occupied by KKH workers at the time of research, but recommended should it reopen for business.

Gulmit Biryani House (mains Rs 30-50) A good road-stop restaurant on the Highway, offering up a small selection of freshly cooked meals and hot chai (Rs 10). Usually it’s a choice between chicken soup, chicken karai or chicken biryani accompanied by two chapatis.

Evershine Restaurant (mains Rs 40) Near the Gulmit Biryani House, and almost identical.

Karachi Haleem & Fast Food (mains Rs 50) Down at the chowk, this curry joint has snacks and cold drinks for those on the move.

Getting There & Away

A local minibus departs Gulmit for Ganish (Rs 35) en route to Karimabad at about 6.30am. A special hire to Karimabad may cost as much as Rs 600. The first northbound buses pass through at about 10am. Flag down minibuses anywhere along the Highway. It’s a four- to five-hour walk to Passu – about 15km via Borit Lake.

PASSU

@ 05822 / elevation 2770m

Sitting between the black Batura Glacier and the white Passu Glacier, this is another place to stop if you like to hike. At 2400m, Passu is the base for some dramatic hikes and longer treks.

Although Passu is one of the oldest settlements in Hunza-Gojal, a kind of geographical curse has prevented it from growing into a town. As glaciers periodically dammed the Shimshal River and then broke, floods have gradually torn away Passu’s riverfront land. The 1974 mudslide at Shishkut Nala created a lake that submerged parts of the village and choked the valley with sand and gravel. At one time Passu had extensive orchards, a polo field and nearly five times its present population.

The highest point of the stunning rocky ‘cathedral’ ridge across the river is 6106m Tupopdan (Wakhi for ‘hot rock’, because in winter its slopes shed the snow quickly). On lower slopes are messages, spelt out with painted rocks, dating from the Aga Khan’s 1987 visit to Gojal.

The village is below Passu Inn, where buses usually stop. Buses will also drop or collect you at hotels out on the KKH.

Activities

WALKS

No excursion longer than a day should be undertaken without sound advice and weather information, and preferably a reliable guide. Foreigners who think of these trips as dawdlers

ISMAILI ISLAM

An 8th-century split among Shiites, who disagreed on which son of the sixth imam (Muslim religious leader) should succeed him, gave rise to the Ismaili (Maulai) branch of Islam. For Ismaili Shiites, the line of imams continues into the present. Ismailis today number several million in pockets of Pakistan (namely Hunza and Gojal), India, East Africa, Iran and Syria, and their present leader (since 1957), Prince Karim Aga Khan, is considered to be imam No 49. Doctrines are more esoteric and practices less regimented than those of Ithnashari Shiites or Sunnis. The style of prayer is a personal matter (eg there is no prostration), the mosque is replaced by a community hall called a jamaat khana and women are less secluded. The present Aga Khan has considerably modernised Ismaili life and set up trusts and institutions to bring social and political security to the scattered Ismaili communities.
frequently get into trouble here. For help finding a guide, ask any of Passu’s hotel-wallahs, and see p337. At the time of research Hunza Valley Experience (50004 ext 42) was setting up an office opposite the Glacier Breeze Restaurant to provide trekking and cultural tours with guides and jeeps for hire. For a two-day excursion across the Hunza River see the Avdegar trek on p355. For the description of a five-day trek along the giant Batura Glacier from Passu, see p356. Further treks in the region are described in detail in Lonely Planet’s Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush. And remember never to walk alone.

Glacier Views

An easy trail goes to the lake below Passu Glacier from the stone barns 500m south of Passu Inn. Better views of this beautiful glacier are from the Yunz Valley and Passu Ghar trails.

In the other direction, the toe of the Batura Glacier is 4km north of Batura Inn. The views improve as you climb the moraine along its south side.

Zarabad & Hussaini (The Two Bridges Walk)

This trip crosses the Hunza River on two long suspension bridges, and has good views of the Passu and Ghulkin Glaciers from the other side. It takes four to five hours from Passu to Hussaini, plus a hitchhike or walk back (8km to 10km along the KKH or via Borit Lake).

From the KKH, at the first hairpin turn, south of Shisper View Hotel, a trail drops to the right of a settlement called Yashvandan. Climb the far side of the ravine, following a path (marked by cairns) to the riverbed, then up another path on the bank to the first bridge, about 1km from Yashvandan. It’s just a cluster of cables with planks and branches woven in. On a windy day it will make you feel like Indiana Jones.

On the far side a trail branches left at another cairn, but you should continue straight on. Climb towards the canyon walls and cross the erosion gully as high as possible – don’t attempt to short cut across the unstable gully. The trail then leads gently down to the small village of Zarabad. A dramatic narrow track then descends a sheer rock face to the second bridge.

Hussaini, back on the other side, is in a hollow below the KKH. It has a warm spring by the river’s edge, used by Hussaini women for washing (so tourists are probably not welcome to bathe). At the north end of the village is a white shrine to Shah Talib, a Muslim missionary active in the 17th or 18th century. A path climbs to the Highway near the shrine.

Yunz Valley

The massive caramel-coloured rock behind Passu is Zard Sar (Yellow Top). A vigorous six- to seven-hour loop climbs to the glacial Yunz Valley behind it, offering excellent views of both the Batura and Passu Glaciers. This is a hot, strenuous walk with no water along the trail.

Skirt around the lake below Passu Glacier and follow cairns west up gravel and then scree to the top of a rock formation half an hour from the lake. From here the trail over the glacier’s lateral moraine, west up a small parallel valley and north up to Yunz Valley itself, is fairly clear. From a pair of huts an hour up Yunz Valley, a steep 1½- to two-hour detour climbs to Zard Sar, with views over the Hunza Valley (stick to the track: a tourist is said to have fallen to his death from here).
At the end of Yunz Valley, keep right and descend steeply past more huts to the valley and moraine beside the enormous 56km-long Batura Glacier. From here, it’s still two or three hours down and across the low plateau to the right, back to Passu.

Passu Ghar
This hike climbs about 700m in elevation to shepherds’ huts along the south side of the Passu Glacier and back, in six to seven hours. The trail leaves the KKH at a Highway sign 500m beyond Shisper View Hotel, where power lines cross the road. The huts are about two hours beyond the bottom of the glacier.

Over the years this once-big lake has become swampy and brackish (borit is Wakhi for ‘salty’), possibly because the underground seepage that feeds it has decreased as the glaciers recede. Villagers of nearby Ghulkin have organised themselves to keep hunters from threatening migratory waterfowl, mainly tufted ducks, which rest here in April and May and again in October and November.

For information on seasonal accommodation at the lake and walks beyond, see p309. A return option from the lake is simply to walk half an hour down the bouldery jeep road to the KKH and hitch back to Passu. The lake also makes a good overnight stop on a walk between Passu and Gulmit.

Sleeping & Eating
Passu Inn (☎ 50003 ext 38; dm/s/d with cold-water bathroom Rs 100/150/200, s/d with hot shower Rs 350/500) This friendly inn is right by the KKH bus stand and close to the small village shops. The rooms are comfortable, spacious and clean, with the more-expensive rooms upstairs (worth bargaining for). The good restaurant (mains Rs 60 to Rs 90) has simple but delicious set meals (dinner Rs 275), and access to fresh mountain spring water.

Our pick Glacier Breeze Restaurant (☎ 50003 ext 17; camping/tent Rs 70/250) High above the Highway, with a stairway to taste-bud heaven, this excellent restaurant (mains Rs 80 to Rs 240, open 7am to late) continues to astound travellers with its quality Hunza-inspired fare and incongruous location. Signature dishes include chicken cooked in local herbs, purziyh sahar (paneer with spicy fried spinach) and Hunza apricot chicken. There’s even a kids’ menu. The apricot cake (Rs 45 per slice) is divine, and chocoholics will have their prayers answered. And there’s real coffee! The tented accommodation is set up in summer and includes mattresses, sleeping bags and hot showers. Entrepreneurial chef Ahmed Ali Khan can provide dried and vacuum-packed meals for trekkers, and runs cooking classes (Rs 300, at least an hour). Inquire about the full-moon dinner where a filling set meal (Rs 500) is followed by a hike onto the eerily luminous Passu Glacier.

Batura Inn (☎ 50003 ext 22; camping free, dm/s/d Rs 75/150/200) Friendly Batura Inn, 800m north of the village on the KKH, has some very tired, threadbare rooms. There’s no running hot water but you can request it by the bucketful. The restaurant (set dinner Rs 90) is also basic but has access to mountain spring water. The owner keeps a rumour book for travellers to gain and impart knowledge about the area.

Shisper View Hotel (☎ 50003, ext 9; camping Rs 80, dm/d shared bathroom/d Rs 80/300/500) This hotel is 1.5km south on the KKH and although some rooms have great mountain and glacier views, their gloominess and the dark restaurant (set dinner Rs 90) let this place down.

Passu Peak Inn (www.passupeakinn.cjb.net; dm/s Rs 70/200, d Rs 350-500) The rooms at this small hotel, 1.5km north of the village, are spartan but spotless with cold showers. Hot water plumbing is planned!

Passu Tourist Lodge (☎ 50004, ext 37; s/d Rs 1200/1400) This comfortable, well-run lodge, 2.5km north of Passu on the KKH, is under the same management as the Silk Route Lodge in Gulmit and is aimed at tour groups. Rooms are in spacious private cottages and the restaurant (mains Rs 80 to Rs 170) has a multicuisine menu.

Passu Ambassador Hotel (☎ 50004, ext 36; s/d Rs 1200/1600) Another comfortable option aimed at groups, with carpeted rooms and reliable hot water, plus satellite TV in the lounge. The lodge is 2km north of the village on the KKH, and the restaurant (mains Rs 150 to Rs 230) is very good.

Hotel Sarai Silk Route (☎ 50003, ext 9; s/d Rs 1800/2000) This small, six-room hotel, 1.5km south of the village, has delightful carpeted rooms with bathtubs in the bathrooms. The front-facing rooms have views of Tupalan.
The Japanese-sounding Mizushima Restaurant (mains Rs 120 to Rs 240) has an extensive Pakistani, Chinese and Continental (pizzas) menu but no Japanese dishes.

Although closed at the time of writing, there are two inexpensive guesthouses with traditional-style dorm and double rooms within Passu village that may reopen for summer business.

**Getting There & Away**
Southbound minibuses pass through after 6am, and the first northbound minibus passes through at around 10am; put your bags beside the road and the buses will stop. After midday, buses are far from frequent. You can travel from Passu to Gulmit (Rs 20, 25 minutes), Aliabad (Rs 60, two hours) and Sost (Rs 50, one hour).

**SHIMSHAL VALLEY**
Shimshal is a large Wakhi-speaking village supported by vast herds of sheep, goats and yaks that are moved up and down the valley with the seasons. These traditional migrations provide the basis for some of Gojal’s most exquisite trekking (see p357). Remote Shimshal was closed to visitors until 1986, after which increasing numbers of adventurers braved the mountain trail through the narrow Shimshal gorge. It was from upper Shimshal, even as late as the 1890s, that raiders harried caravans heading to Kashmir. In 2003 a jeep road was inaugurated that finally linked Shimshal village to the KKH.

The road to Shimshal leaves the KKH at the snout of the Batura Glacier, 6km north of Passu. It crosses the Hunza River on a suspension bridge and then enters the narrow gorge of the lower Shimshal River; a more ominous gateway would be hard to imagine. After about an hour of negotiating a shifting, cliff-hugging jeep track and crossing a couple of daunting bridges you arrive at Dut, a reafforested oasis with no permanent settlement but a few huts for shepherds and road workers. Soon after Dut the valley opens out, closes in again, and glaciers approach the road. It’s hard to picture more awe-inspiring and stark scenery. Flowing off the lofty white mass of Destaghil Sar (7885m), Mulungutti Glacier descends right to the road.

Shimshal is made up of three villages: Aminabad, Shimshal and Khizarabad. Aminabad is announced by vast fields of stones hemmed in by drystone walls, and fortress-like houses of stone and mud. As you approach Shimshal look for a glimpse of Adver Sar (6400m), also known as Shimshal Whitehorn. Shimshal has hydroelectricity for five months of the year (when the water isn’t frozen), and although there is a general store with small stocks of biscuits, noodles, sugar, salt, milk, tea and rice etc, it would be wise to be self-sufficient with trekking needs.

**Sleeping & Eating**
**Sifat Guesthouse** (dm/r Rs 100/400) This guesthouse is designed on traditional Shimshali themes offering a carpeted dining room/dorm and a few basic rooms with bucket hot water.

**Mountain Palace Tourist Lodge** (r Rs 400) Next door and under the same management as Shimshal Tourist Lodge, the rooms here are more basic with bucket hot water.

**Shimshal Tourist Lodge** (camping Rs 100, r Rs 600) This hotel was undergoing a major expansion at the time of research. New rooms under construction boast tiled bathrooms and potentially running hot water. A set dinner here costs Rs 200.

**Getting There & Away**
The road to Shimshal is one of the more exciting mountain roads in northern Pakistan. There are passenger jeeps from Passu to Shimshal that cost Rs 100 per person and take 2½ to three hours to cover the 55km. Rockslides frequently cause delays. A special hire will cost Rs 3500.

**PASSU TO SOST**
North of Passu the KKH crosses a bridge over the stream from the Batura Glacier, one of the Karakoram’s biggest, reaching 56km back into the Batura Muztagh. The dirty grey ice comes almost to the road. East of the bridge is the narrow entrance to the Shimshal Valley. A further 12km brings you to the village of Khyber and another 10km to Morkhun, both with basic accommodation.

The Boibar Valley above Morkhun is probably the most historically interesting part of Gojal. Tajiks arrived here from what is now Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor in perhaps the 16th century, founding the village of Avgarch (3200m). An old wood-carved mosque and two forts still stand, reminders of the battles with Kyrgyz people. After Gojal
came under the control of the mirs of Hunza, they settled at Gircha, Jamalabad, Morkhun and Ghalapan. If you’re fit, you can climb up the rugged, boulder-strewn Boibar Valley to Avgarch, 450m above Morkhun, and return in about six hours (but stay away on rainy or windy days, when rocks hurtle down the scree fields). See Lonely Planet’s Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush for details on going further than this.

**Sleeping & Eating**

The following places all do basic food.

Khyber Inn (r Rs 400) Also in Khyber, this gloomy hotel has spartan triples.

Greenland Hotel (r Rs 500) At Morkhun, the Greenland has serviceable doubles with hot shower for a highly negotiable price.

Khyber Village Guesthouse (s/d Rs 800/1200) At Khyber, the best option is this cozy, tidy brown house at the top of the town, right on the Highway.

**SOST & AFIYATABAD**

G 05823 / elevation 2700m

In 1996 Pakistani customs and immigration shifted several kilometres upstream to what is officially called Afiyatabad, sometimes called New Sost but most frequently just called Sost. Afiyatabad/Sost is a frontierlike strip of shoddy hotels and dank teashops, frequented by Chinese traders, frenetic bus drivers, moneychangers, jeep-wallahs and their passengers.

Old Sost is a quiet backwater and most travellers will never see the original village of Sost (also spelled Sust), or Upper Sost, at 3100m on a ledge above the Highway. But if you have the time you can strike north through fields from old Sost to Upper Sost and follow the trails to Sost Nala. The walled fields, the poplars and fruit orchards, and the dramatic canyon make for a very different scene from the one along the road.

Across the river from Afiyatabad, about an hour’s walk away, is Khudabad village and Khudabad Nala.

**Orientation & Information**

The post office, Natco, PTDC and all long-distance transport options are in Afiyatabad. The National Bank here accepts cash in US dollars only, and buys rupees. Moneychangers, also in Afiyatabad, exchange Chinese money for rupees and US dollars; cash rates are a bit better than the bank’s rates. The police (51223) are based at old Sost.

**Sleeping & Eating**

Four Brothers Hotel & Restaurant (51204; s/d Rs 150/250) The rooms at Four Brothers are overpriced even with these modest rates. Rooms and beds are very bottom end, as are the bathrooms, though some have running hot water.

Asia Star Hotel (51115; s/d/tr Rs 200/300/400) Asia Star’s rooms are probably the pick of the cheapies in terms of cleanliness and comfort. There’s running hot water, friendly man-
agement and a good inexpensive restaurant (mains Rs 45 to Rs 180).

Hotel Al-Mahmood (☎ 50166; s/d/tr Rs 200/300/400) Has tolerably grimy rooms with running hot water in the bathrooms.

Park Hotel (☎ 51035; s/d Rs 250/350) The Park has clean carpeted rooms, all of which are inexplicably crammed with three single beds, making it hard to get to the bathrooms. Definitely good value, however.

Badakhshan Hotel (☎ 51039; s/d/tr Rs 300/400/500) The scruffy carpeted rooms could do with a clean, though there were nice smells emanating from the restaurant (mains Rs 50 to Rs 150).

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Sky Bridge Inn (☎ 51006; s/d Rs 400/500) The Sky Bridge is pretty good value though you have to pay an extra Rs 200 for the rooms with TV and sit-down flush toilet. All rooms are carpeted and have running hot water in the morning. This is a place where you can organise trekking in the Chapursan Valley.

Khunjarab Hotel (☎ 51006; dm/s/d Rs 150/600/800) The Khunjarab has a lovely rural setting amid orchards at old Sost. However, when we visited all the rooms with hot showers were occupied on a semipermanent basis by government officials, leaving just gloomy rooms with no hot water and the offer of free camping.

PTDC Motel Sost (☎ 51030; s/d Rs 1350/1550) Rooms here are large and comfortable, though this is one of the very few PTDC motels where you may find dirty bed linen, unswept carpet and a hot water-wallah who sleeps in. The restaurant (mains Rs 100 to Rs 150) has filling if bland set meals. This place closes at the end of November and opens 1 May. Ask for a 20% discount towards the end of the season.

Hotel Riveria (☎ 51081; s/d Rs 1500/1800) This is easily the best hotel in town, and though clearly targeted at tour groups the management welcomes all-comers. The rooms are spacious, spotless and well presented with TVs and telephone. The restaurant (mains Rs 85 to Rs 110) has Chinese, Pakistani and Continental cuisine and organises lavish buffets when a group is in.

Getting There & Away
Most southbound transport leaves early in the morning, with the first minibuses full and ready to leave by 6am. Buses leave when full, and as the day progresses there may be one or two hours between departures. Nellum Transport (operating out of a tiny unsigned tin booth) arranges minibuses to Gilgit (Rs 180, five hours) via Passu (Rs 40, one hour), Gulumit (Rs 50, 1½ hours) and Ganish/Aliabad (Rs 90, three hours).

TO/FROM KASHGAR
Travellers must have a visa to cross the border into China. For more details, see p378.

The Khunjerab Pass is officially open to foreigners from 1 May to 15 November, unless snow closes it sooner. Landslides can cancel these trips even in summer. It’s a good idea to carry a day’s water and snacks. You will need to have US$4 (or the exact equivalent in rupees) to pay the Khunjerab National Park fee at Dih. Natco and PTDC do the five- to six-hour trip to Tashkurgan, and a Chinese bus takes you on to Kashgar next morning. Recent developments have allowed the returning Chinese and Natco buses from the Gilgit–Kashgar run to take passengers on their return journeys, but this hadn’t been extended to the Sost–Tashkurgan run at the time of research.

Organise your Tashkurgan ticket the day before departure. Natco (☎ 50209; ☏ 7am-7pm) runs vehicles to suit the size of the crowd – Land Cruiser, minibus or bus. The per person fare is Rs 1500 in any vehicle. A ‘special’ hire costs Rs 9000. The PTDC can also organise your transport, and may offer a discount to the Natco for a special hire – though you might also find yourself with a ‘guest’ accompanying your special hire.

Departure awaits customs and immigration formalities, which are usually straightforward and begin with customs rifling through your bag at about 8.30am. They are pretty thorough as there has been quite a bit of drug trafficking in recent years. After customs you proceed to Immigration to fill out a form and get an exit stamp in your passport. For information on Chinese customs regulations, see p368.

Getting Around
There’s no regular transport between Afiyatabad and old Sost. A Suzuki for hire is around about Rs 60. The walk takes about 15 to 20 minutes, though you may pick up a tractor ride along the way.

CHAPURSAN VALLEY
Stretching northwest of Afiyatabad for approximately 80km towards the Wakhan Corridor...
of Afghanistan, the remote Chapursan Valley sees very few visitors though it offers splendid trekking opportunities (see p359) and the chance to experience the renowned Wakhi hospitality and culture.

Just beyond the northern limit of Afiyatabad the winding link road to Chapursan intersects with the KKH. After travelling through crumbling mountains and sliding scree slopes that make the trip adventurous at any time but exceedingly dangerous during rain, the simple but colourful Panja Shah Ziarat, a shrine to a Sufi saint, is reached after about 40 minutes. Soon after, the first village of the valley, Yazrich is signalled by a rare splash of green vegetation and low stone-and-mud dwellings typical of the valley. Fifteen minutes further is the large village of Raminj, mostly hidden above the road. The next three villages – Aminabad, Rahimabad and Nurabad – are clustered where the valley broaden into a bowl and are collectively known as Kirmin. Ten minutes on, massive slopes of grey scree are separated from the green wheat terraces and irrigation canals of Kil, a village that spans the river and is linked by a tenuous suspension bridge. The next villages along the valley road are Reshit and nearby Sher-e-Sabz, each with a guesthouse, then Ispanj and Shuthmarg, before the final village of Zood Khun, at about 3500m.

At Zood Khun, accommodation, trekking information, yak and jeep transport and more can be found at the Pamir Serai guesthouse run by the redoubtable Alam Jan Dario, horseman, musician and ambassador of Wakhi Tajik culture. As the operator of Pamir Trails (www.pamirtrails.com), Alam Jan Dario runs cultural and adventurous treks on foot or horseback into the valleys and over the passes of his spectacular homeland.

Beyond Zood Khun is the mystical and holy Baba Ghundi Ziarat, a shrine to a Sufi saint said to have miraculous powers, and a popular pilgrimage site. The shrine is surrounded by meadows that host herds of sheep in summer and, sporadically from June to September, Kyrgyz traders from Afghanistan who traditionally cross the Irshad Pass with horses, yaks and sheep to trade with the Chapursan villagers.

Sleeping & Eating

There is a village guesthouse at the village of Reshit and nearby is the Chupurson Village Guesthouse (per person Rs 300) in Sher-e-Sabz, which has a traditional Wakhi dining and/or sleeping room as well as a bedroom with three single beds. Mains here will cost you from Rs 50 to Rs 100.

In Zood Khun, Pamir Serai (☎️ 03465226623; www.pamirtrails.com; bed Rs 150) offers traditional accommodation in the house of Alam Jan Dario. This means you eat (meals Rs 50) and sleep with the family in the traditional house on floor mattresses. Pamir Serai also has a hut with a basic kitchen and mattresses and blankets at Baba Ghundi that can be used by guests.

Getting There & Away

Regular cargo jeeps to Zood Khun (Rs 100) leave Afiyatabad’s bazaar (usually around 2pm), from near the Four Brothers Hotel. Because Chapursan is beyond the Pakistani Immigration checkpoint at Afiyatabad, you will need to sign in and out at the checkpoint at Afiyatabad. The jeep leaves Zood Khun at around 5.30am. A special hire will cost around Rs 1800. A special hire from Zood Khun to Baba Ghundi is about Rs 1500 for the return trip. Access depends on the river level. Many choose to hike to Baba Ghundi from Zood Khun and spend the night there before returning the next day.

MISGAR

Misgar is the last village in the greater Hunza valley and the base for an easy and fascinating trek to Kilik and Mintaka Passes (see p360). These ancient Silk Route gateways to Central Asia and China also staged Great Game intrigue during the reign of the British Raj. The Mintaka Pass was the usual route to Tashkurgan before the opening of the KKH over the Khunjerab Pass.

Because Misgar is beyond the Pakistani Immigration checkpoint at Afiyatabad you will need to sign in and out at the checkpoint at Afiyatabad. Approximately 7km north of Sost the Misgar link road intersects with the KKH. The good road travels for 16km through a desolate landscape of orange canyon walls with black lifeless mountains above and the clear, green Kilik River below. At Misgar village there is no hotel accommodation but you can arrange a room with one of the villagers or camp in the grounds of the post office. The tiny Qurban General Store has noodles, milk, biscuits etc.
Getting There & Away
Vehicles to Misgar (Rs 50) leave Afiyatabad’s bazaar, from near the Four Brothers Hotel, but they do not run to a regular schedule. A special hire will cost around Rs 1000.

THE KHUNJERAB PASS
It’s 35km, through some of the narrowest and bleakest gorges on the KKH, from Sost to the security and national park checkpoints at Dih. You must have US$4 cash (or exact equivalent in rupees) to pay the Khunjerab National Park fee here. Much of the Pakistan side of the pass is within the 2270-sq-km Khunjerab National Park (KNP; see p68), which was established in 1975. The pass is one of the few known habitats of the big, curly-horned Marco Polo sheep, of which there are now only a few hundred in the world. It’s also home to Himalayan ibex, golden marmots, wolves and snow leopards.

A KNP resthouse at Dih may be available to the public if no officials are using it.

From Dih to the pass it’s about 50km. Scattered along the KKH are deserted concrete buildings – hostels for Chinese KKH workers, built in the late 1960s when the road was being laid to Gulmit. At Koksil the ruins of a work camp straddle the river at a large side-canyon. The valley walls are ‘black, crumbling rock’ (this is how the Turki words kara koram translate) and the river cuts through deep beds of gravel, the residue of repeated mud and rock slides. The Highway switches back and forth as it climbs above Koksil.

The pass itself is long and flat. At the summit is a plaque commemorating the 1982 opening. At this point you’re about 400km from Kashgar and 880km from Rawalpindi. Something besides the time zone changes at the top, namely the side of the road on which you drive (China is right-hand drive, Pakistan left-hand), so it’s probably a good thing that just about everybody stops for a photo break here. Just beyond the border, at the Chinese security post, you fill out an entry card and Health & Quarantine Declaration and have your passport and luggage checked. A deadpan Chinese soldier, almost inevitably a smoker, will accompany you in your bus or Natco vehicle from here to Tashkurgan, ostensibly to prevent any unseemly speeding, stopping or detouring.

THE ROAD TO KASHGAR
The Chinese call the road stretching from the Khunjerab Pass to Kashgar the China Friendship Rd or the China–Pakistan Highway, Zhong-Pa Gong Lu (China–Pak Big Rd). The road is generally in better condition on the Chinese side. It runs for 250km through the high, rounded valleys of the Taghdumbash Pamir, 70km down the Ghez River canyon and 80km to Kashgar across the flats at the edge of Xinjiang’s Taklamakan Desert. This is a region of sublime scenery and weather extremes, a 2000-year-old passage for trade, plunder and religious ideas.
WHAT’S THE TIME?
A constant concern for travellers is clock time. Officially, all China runs on Beijing time (which is three hours earlier than Pakistan time) but here, 3500km from Beijing, people set their watches to unofficial ‘Xinjiang time’, two hours earlier than Beijing. You must run on both times, always checking which is meant (Uyghur: Beijing waqt; Chinese: Beijing shijian?). Note that airline schedules and government office hours are always given in Beijing time.

See p315 for information on transport from Pakistan to Kashgar.

THE KHUNJERAB PASS TO TASHKURGAN
From the pass to Pirali you may see herds of yaks or a domesticated cross between yak and cow called dzu, and in warmer weather you’ll see golden marmots as they scuttle for their burrows. Pirali, the former Chinese customs post, is four hours from Sost at about 4100m. The level stretch along the Tashkurgan River from Pirali to Tashkurgan is grand and picturesque in fine weather, with muscular-looking peaks along the west side of the valley and sporadic horse and camel traffic.

The road passes the mouth of an enormous opening westwards into the Pamir – the Mintaka Valley, once a major Silk Road branch and historically one of the main routes to Hunza and on to Kashmir. About 75km up the Mintaka Valley, a jeep track enters Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor. Settlements from Gojal over the Khunjerab Pass to Tashkurgan are Wakhi Tajik. About 1½ hours from Pirali is Davdar, the largest permanent Tajik settlement along the Highway. Two hours later you’re in Tashkurgan.

TASHKURGAN
© 0998 / elevation 3200m
In the Uyghur language, tash kurgan means ‘stone fortress’. The ruins of a huge mud-brick fort still stand on the edge of town, and although estimated to be about 600 years old, local lore says Tashkurgan has been a citadel for over 2300 years. The Greek philosopher-scientist Ptolemy (AD 90–168) mentioned Tashkurgan in his Guide to Geography as a stop on the road to China. The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuan Zang wrote about the fortress in the 7th century, when it was the furthest frontier outpost of the Tang dynasty.

Tashkurgan has little else to offer, although if you’re coming from Pakistan you’ll delight in (a) public conversations with women, and (b) beer (which may knock you back considerably at this elevation). Tashkurgan is a frontier town through and through. Government expansion has brought wide avenues, Han businesses and traffic lights but Tajiks still gather to play pool on outside tables and engage in earnest street-corner discussion in the afternoon before the ubiquitous kebab stands start to smoulder and smoke.

This is the site of the Chinese customs and immigration post. It’s also the administrative centre of Tashkurgan Tajik Autonomous County, stretching from Muztagh Ata to the border, and is home to most of China’s Tajiks. Tashkurgan is about 290km from Kashgar.

Orientation & Information
Tashkurgan Rd, Tashkurgan’s straight and wide main thoroughfare, has been designated a ‘Cultural Street for Travelling and Shopping’, or so the sign says. Buses, northbound and southbound, stop in the compound of the Jiaotong Binguan (Traffic Hotel; Tashkurgan Rd).

Travelling (or shopping) in a northeasterly direction along Tashkurgan Rd takes you past hotels, restaurants, gift shops and schools, and finally the Pamir Hotel and the entrance to the fort.

Customs and immigration are about 1km south of town on the KKH. Your bus (if you’re southbound or northbound) will take you from/to the bus station – though you could catch a taxi or even walk in the time it usually takes for the bus to set off.

You can change cash, preferably US dollars, at Jiaotong Binguan.

The Public Security Bureau (PSB;  Beijing time 10am-2pm & 5-8pm) is south of the bus station. Reception for the foreign affairs section is inside the right-hand entrance. There’s an internet café (per hour Y5) and a PCO with an IDD telephone office on the road behind the Jiaotong Binguan.

Sights
FORT
Tashkurgan’s one attraction is the massive, crumbling fort (admission Y20) northeast of town,
on the only hill in the Tashkurgan River’s flood plain. Most of its multilayered walls and battlements are still intact and yurts dot the flood plain. Don’t miss sunset. The entrance is up an incongruous flight of steps at the east end of town.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Gong de Hotel** (3423396; Tashkurgan Rd; d Y60) This hotel is amazingly filthy and the rooms will only disappoint, even at this price.

**Jiaotong Binguan** (Traffic Hotel; 3421192; Tashkurgan Rd; dm/d Y15/120, d VIP Y300) You’ll probably be dropped at this hotel if travelling by bus. The management speak English and run an informal information service and can change money. The four-bed dorms are usually noisy and dirty and the shared bathroom can be diabolical. The doubles with bathrooms are much better, though it is wise to inspect a few rooms before settling in. The VIP rooms have a small lounge but are overpriced. The hotel’s Traffic Café (mains Y8 to Y20) has an English menu and cold beer, though the meals delivered may not always match the menu description. Unless you have honed your Chinese or Tajik language skills, breakfast is a bit of a lottery and certainly an experience.

**Ben Lei Xin Hotel** (3423488; China Friendship Rd; d/ste Y120/150) The Ben Lei has probably the best beds in Tashkurgan and the suite is very comfey. However, the restaurant will only open when a tour group is booked in.
Stone City Hotel (☎ 3422600; Hangqinapu Rd; d Y140)
The Stone City is often the choice for tour groups, with OK rooms with bathrooms though all suffer from hard beds and many from cigarette odour. Little English is spoken but staff are friendly. The restaurant ( mains Y18 to Y45) has a partially English menu.

Pamir Hotel (☎ 3421085; Tashkurgan Rd; dm/d/ste Y80/200/320)
The Pamir is convenient to the fort but little else. Dorm beds share a common toilet but there’s no shower. The comfortable doubles in the newer wing have a hot shower (test it before accepting the room) and cheaper doubles in the old wing have a tub. The suites are plush but the beds are rock-hard. The restaurant here doesn’t operate unless there are sufficient guests. If there is a tour group, dinner may be accompanied by a diverting dance and music show.

Tashkurgan’s nonhotel restaurants are like meterless taxis: agree on a price before you commit. Gouging tourists is a local sport, though you should be able to fill up for Y30. Little English is spoken, so unless there’s a menu, go into the kitchen and point to the ingredients you want. Several bakeries open early enough to beat the bus, with hot naan (Y1) and tea (Y1). There’s a vegetable and produce market north of town behind the alfresco pool tables. Ben Lei Xin supermarkets and other general stores sell noodles and other supplies.

Near Jiaotong Binguan is a friendly bar (Tashkurgan Rd) where you can settle down to your first or last beer (pijiu) and peanuts (huasheng).

Getting There & Away
You can buy bus tickets the day before departure from the ticket office inside customs (the office is about 1km south of Jiaotong Binguan). If you are staying at Jiaotong Binguan you can get assistance from hotel staff.

A bus takes passengers from Tashkurgan on to Kashgar (Y62, seven hours, 296km) departing at about 9.30am (Beijing time). To Kara Kul (100km) costs Y25. On departure you may also be hit for an extra baggage charge. A special hired vehicle to Kashgar will cost about Y400 and carry three passengers and luggage comfortably, stopping along the way wherever and whenever you want. Inquire with your hotel reception.

The bus to Sost (Y225, 220km) is scheduled to leave at 10.30am but usually leaves much, much later after customs and immigration formalities. If you have booked your ticket from Kashgar to Sost (Y270), you will be already on the manifest and you can hop on the bus at the Bus Station/Jiaotong Binguan for the short ride to customs. Some cyclists have been charged a ‘loading’ fee when putting their bikes on the roof, but this is highly negotiable.

TASHKURGAN TO KARA KUL
About 1½ hours from Tashkurgan, across the marshy Tagharma Basin, is a police post at Kekyor. On the very broad, high (around 4000m) ground west of Muztagh Ata, called the Subash Plateau (Subash Daban), the Highway makes its closest approach (about 10km) to Tajikistan. At the turn of the century this area was still in dispute, never having been properly mapped. Before long the dominant item in the landscape is 7546m Muztagh Ata (Turkic for Father of Ice Mountains).

Settlements from Tashkurgan to Kekyor are Sarykoli Tajik; those on to Kara Kul are Kyrgyz. One question that comes repeatedly to mind here is: how can sheep graze on gravel? Three hours from Kekyor is beautiful Kara Kul (Karakol Lake) – properly Lesser Kara Kul, as there’s a bigger lake of the same name 150km northwest in Tajikistan – and two small sister lakes across the road, Besekh Kul and Shor Kul.

KARA KUL
This is one of the most beautiful places in western China, the deep blue waters (kara kul is Uyghur for black lake) nestled between two Pamir giants, Muztagh Ata to the south and 7719m Mt Kongur to the northeast. Many travelers come to Kashgar hoping to rub shoulders with Kyrgyz nomads in the pastures around Kara Kul (Chinese: Kalakuli Hu).

There are several Kyrgyz summer villages in the area; the nearest, just south of the lake, is Subash. You can walk around the lake in half a day; the downstream outflow can be forded at the village nearby. At Subash or elsewhere you can arrange an excursion by horse to jailuu (high pastures), about three hours from the lake at the foot of Muztagh Ata.

With a tent you could spend days at the lake or on the flanks of Muztagh Ata. To walk up to Muztagh Ata base camp, it’s easiest to head south on the Highway for about 14km, then east for 2km to Edara village. From here it’s a climb of about 15km to the base camp, at 4550m. Be
prepared for the worst kind of weather, no matter what it looks like when you start.

The lake is at 3700m and the nights are below freezing even in the summer. Be aware also of summer sandstorms, which can rise in a minute. Between late October and early May the place may be deserted.

A large wind turbine interrupts the otherwise wonderfully desolate view and heralds the presence of the Karakol Lake Resort. Even if you are not staying at the Karakol Lake Resort – a tourist trap – you can be stung Y50 just for entering the resort grounds (ie the car park). At either of the accommodation options at the lake you will be surrounded by Kyrgyz trying to sell you everything from stones to a bed in their yurt. Horse and camel rides start at Y30 per half-hour but are highly negotiable.

Sleeping & Eating
Karakol Lake Resort (yurts per person Y50, dm/d Y40/100)
This Chinese development has mock-up yurts and a few quads and double rooms. Don’t be fooled by the bathrooms – there’s no plumbing and you will have to brave the disgusting outside ‘amenities’. Yurts sleep eight and management will fill up one yurt before starting on the next. Campers and cyclists who opt to pitch their own tents should move 15 minutes off around the lake to avoid hassles with the resort management. The restaurant (mains Y20 to Y80) here is decent, if not great value, with an English menu.

Yurts (per person Y20)
South of the resort are real yurts where you can stay and be fed in Kyrgyz fashion (meals Y10). The yurt is surprisingly warm, the cleanliness of the blankets and mattresses highly questionable, and the food basic but generous.

Sawut Fast Food Restaurant (yurts per person Y40)
This cluster of yurts beside the lake, about 3km beyond the resort (heading towards Kashgar), is a much better option. The friendly Kyrgyz-owned operation has a colourful yurt restaurant (mains Y25) where you can sip bottomless green tea and enjoy fresh vegetable and meat dishes. Accommodation is in yurts with clean bedding and if there is room there is no need to share with strangers. The outside toilets are, of course, rudimentary.

Getting There & Away
Local Kashgar to Tashkurgan buses will stop at Kara Kul, though some travellers have had trouble flagging one down again when they were ready to return or move on. You can catch the bus to Kashgar (Y43) or Tashkurgan (Y25) if they stop to let tourists take photos of the lake. Seats are usually available to Kara Kul on the bus from Kashgar to Pakistan, on a stand-by basis (Y43).

Tour and travel agencies in Kashgar (p323) can organise day trips to the lake for about Y500, with a guide and lunch. An overnight stay adds at least Y200 per person for bed, dinner and vehicle charges. More-interesting trips, such as an overnight stay at Subash with local walks, a night or two at Muztagh Ata base camp or five- to seven-day treks on the mountain, can also be arranged.

KARA KUL TO KASHGAR
An hour from the lake, at the foot of Mt Kongur, is the settlement of Bulunkul Dobey, an outpost of the larger Kyrgyz settlement of Bulunkul. Most settlements from Kara Kul to the Ghez River canyon are Kyrgyz; those on the Kashgar plain are Uyghur.

The corridor northwest to Muji and south to the Pakistan border is a Pamir valley flanked by a rampart of snowy peaks, the Sarykol Pamir. The word pamir refers to pasturage, the valleys’ main historical use. The terrain is typical of the Pamirs: high, broad, treeless valleys strung between glacier-rounded mountains, with rivers often pooling into shallow lakes.

Just before you enter the canyon of the Ghez River (Uyghur: Ghez Darya), the Ghez seems to lose its way in a vast wet plain ringed with grey-white sand dunes, a strangely beautiful spot that locals call Kumtagh (Sand Mountain). A few hardy individuals brave the fierce dry winds to sell garnets, crystals and oddments to travellers. A hot spring is inside a plain brick building by the river, near the top of the canyon.

As you enter the canyon the landscape changes abruptly. The 70-odd kilometres of road are cut into sheer walls, or woven across huge tilted boulder fields; the canyon walls are immense, steep and lifeless, forbidding even on a sunny day. Ghez itself is a lonely military checkpoint with a few shops and teashops. Photographing soldiers or buildings here may result in a confiscated camera.

After Ghez you soon exit the canyon’s wine-red sandstone walls at its northern
end and head across 80km of flats towards Kashgar. The main attraction is the luminous rampart of the Pamirs rising from the plain to the west. At Upal (Chinese: Wupa’er) is a food stop (a pretty silly place for one, whichever direction you’re headed). It’s only an hour from Kashgar, but the buses always seem to stop here. Three kilometres off the road is the small tomb of Mahmud Kashgari, an 11th-century scholar famous for writing the first dictionary of Turkic languages. As you approach Kashgar, the villages, poplars and dusty roadworks multiply.

**KASHGAR**

% 0998 / elevation 1354m

Far-flung Kashgar (Kashi) is modern China’s westernmost city. For two millennia this exotic desert oasis has been a Silk Road trading hub; a Central Asian bazaar with an intoxicating cocktail of peoples. Even today it remains just a big market town, with impromptu street-corner negotiations, perpetual bazaars and a renowned weekly market. Some things haven’t changed for centuries – blacksmiths, carpenters and cobbler work by hand in the old quarter, barbers wield cut-throats, and from surrounding fields come wheat, maize, beans and rice loaded on donkey drays.

But in many ways the past is decidedly gone – symbolically confirmed by the huge statue of Mao Zedong. Wherever you turn, high-rises sprout and department stores multiply. Lime green taxis, noise and fumes and city regulations have pushed out most of the donkey carts and put Kashgar in a league with most other Chinese cities. Id Kah Mosque still stands tall, as it has since 1442, and the chaos of the Sunday market still defies the obvious attempts to contain and compartmentalise.

Peak tourist season (and peak demand for rooms and transport) is from late June to September, with saturation at weekends as tourists arrive for the Sunday market. If you’ve come from Pakistan, Chinese brusqueness will come as a shock, though you’ll find an echo of Pakistani cheer in Uyghur men. It’s also nice to see the female half of the human race out in the open again.

**Orientation**

Official (Chinese) street names are given here. The main streets out from the centre are Renmin Donglu and Renmin Xilu (East and West People’s Rds), and Jiefang Beilu and Jiefang Nanlu (North and South Liberation Rds). The perimeter road on the northwest is Yunmulakexia Lu.

The heart of Kashgar is Id Kah Mosque with its surrounding bazaar and the restored Old Town to the east. Uyghurs live mainly north of the centre and the Chinese in brick compounds to the south. The budget travellers’ enclave is on the west side, with midrange hotels, travel help and good food. The market is east of town, and the livestock market is several kilometres to the south.

**Information**

**INTERNET ACCESS**

Thanks to an addiction to Warcraft games etc internet cafés abound in Kashgar.

**Former British Consulate Café** (144 Seman Lu; per hr Y10) A small operation inside the Chini Bagh’s rear building foyer. Cheaper rate if you buy a beer or a coffee.

**Internet Café** (Seman Lu; per hr Y3) Unsigned café just northeast of Chini Bagh Hotel with plenty of monitors.

**Internet Café** (Seman Lu; per hr Y3) Huge gaming café just southeast of Seman Hotel.

**Seman Travel** (per hr Y5) Another small operation in the Seman Hotel foyer.

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**Health Clinic** (CITS Bldg, Chini Bagh Hotel Compound, Seman Lu) Basic first aid.

**Hospital of Traditional Uyghur Medicine** (Seman Lu) East of Seman Hotel; travellers say it’s pretty dire.

**People’s Hospital** (Renmin Yiyuan; Jiefang Beilu) The main Chinese hospital, north of the river.

**MONEY**

You may be able to change cash at tourist hotels, but at the time of research they were not cashing travellers cheques. Uyghur money-changers loiter outside Chini Bagh Hotel and in the bazaar. There’s little to be gained from dealing with them as their rates are so similar to the banks, and plenty to be lost because some are accomplished cheats.

**Bank of China** (Main Branch; Renmin Donglu; Beijing time 9.30am-1.30pm & 4-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 11am-3pm Sat, winter times are slightly different) Changes travellers cheques and cash in major currencies and gives cash advances on major credit cards at counter No 1. A foreign-exchange ATM is outside facing Renmin Donglu.

**Bank of China ATM** (Jiefang Beilu)

**Bank of China ATM** (Renmin Xilu) West of the main branch.
PERMITS
PSB Exit & Entry Administration Service (111 Yunmulakexia Lu; ☎️ Beijing time 10am-1pm & 4-8pm Mon-Fri) This branch is located just in front of and to the left of the boom gates. Chinese visas can be extended here (one month ¥160). Alien Travel Permits (waibin tongxing zheng) for areas not freely open to foreigners (around ¥50 depending on nationality) are issued here. Some English.

POLICE
PSB (67 Renmin Donglu) The city police station.

POST
Post office (40 Renmin Xilu; ☎️ Beijing time 9.30am-8pm) Buy stamps downstairs, but hand overseas letters to the international desk upstairs. There’s a small charge for each letter you pick up from poste restante.

TELEPHONE
Telephone office (Renmin Xilu; ☎️ Beijing time 9.30am-8pm) Upstairs is for international calls and downstairs for domestic calls. IDD calls here are much cheaper than from tourist hotels and private agencies.

TOURIST INFORMATION & TRAVEL AGENCIES
An enterprising English-speaking Uyghur by the name of Ablimit Ghopor, but better known as Elvis (☏ 13899136195; elvisablimit@yahoo.com), runs an information and guiding service that has received many good reviews from travellers. Elvis can guide you around the old town and introduce you to traditional life in Kashgar, visiting private houses, traditional teahouses and, of course, the Sunday market. Excursions
A TURBULENT PAST
Kashgaria, the historical name for the western end of the Tarim Basin, has always had more in common with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan than with China. But over the centuries imperial China has come again and again to police its borders or the Silk Road.

At the end of WWII, Xinjiang declared independence as the Republic of East Turkestan, aided by Mao Zedong in exchange for Uyghur resistance to the Nationalists. But after Mao’s founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the fledgling state collapsed when most of its leaders died in a mysterious plane crash, en route to Beijing to negotiate with the new regime.

Xinjiang was subsequently declared an ‘autonomous region’, an Orwellian sleight of hand that has failed to deliver much in the way of autonomy. Although China has invested substantial funds developing Xinjiang’s infrastructure, Uyghurs frequently argue that all the good jobs and business opportunities are dominated by Han Chinese. Any time spent in Kashgar shows that integration is not seamless and an underlying tension is ever present.

SUNDAY MARKET
Once a week Kashgar’s population swells as people stream into the Sunday market (east of the city centre off Aiziliati Lu), one of Asia’s most mind-boggling bazaars. By sunrise the roads east of town are a sea of pedestrians, horses, donkey carts, bikes, trucks, cars and buses, everyone shouting ‘Boish-boish!’ (‘Coming through!’). Sellers spruik their wares: rugs, blankets, hats, caps and boots; there are tools, wedding invitations and wonderful dried fruit. And then there are the medicine shops with buckets of live scorpions, jars of preserved toads, desiccated snakes hanging from hooks and tubs of horns from who knows what animal promising cures for who knows what ailment.

The grounds are a 30- or 40-minute walk from the Seman Hotel. A pavilion east of the bridge was conceived as a meeting place for Central Asian and Russian traders and is now a huge carpet showroom.

Taxis (¥5) lurk outside tourist hotels on market day, though traffic may prevent them from taking you right into the heart of the market. Ask for Yekshenba Bazaar (Sunday market). John’s Café (left) offers a free one-way minibus shuttle after breakfast (10am) from both its branches.

No visit to Kashgar is complete without experiencing the flying dust and fur and unfamiliar odours of the animated livestock market. Seemingly crazy men test-ride seem-
ingly unstoppable horses, while boys tether fat-tailed sheep head to head into zipperlike rows. Donkeys bray at being exchanged for Y1000. Handshake contracts become arm wrestles accompanied by full-volume vocal exchanges. Yaks and camels pant in the unfamiliar heat, and vast quantities of laghman noodles are consumed at the makeshift kitchens. Try to get here by 9am (Beijing time) while the wheeling and dealing is in full swing. The livestock market is east of Renmin Donglu. Catch bus 16 on Renmin Donglu or hop in a taxi for Y10 (Y5 from the Sunday market).

ID KAH MOSQUE
This big yellow-tiled mosque (admission Y10) is one of the largest in China, with a peaceful courtyard and gardens for 20,000 worshippers. It was built in 1442 as a smaller mosque on what was then the outskirts of town. During the Cultural Revolution, China’s decade of political anarchy from 1966 to 1976, Id Kah suffered heavy damage, but has since been restored. Its central veranda has a carved and finely painted ceiling.

It’s acceptable for non-Muslims to go in. Local women are rarely seen inside, but foreign women are usually ignored if they’re modestly dressed (arms and legs covered and a scarf on your head). Take your shoes off if you enter covered, carpeted prayer areas, and be discreet with photography.

ABAKH HOJA TOMB
Kashgar’s best example of Islamic architecture is this elegant mausoleum (admission Y15; ❄️ Beijing time 9am-8.30pm), built in the mid-17th century for the descendants of a Muslim missionary named Muhatum Ajam (or Makhtum Azan). With its tiled dome and four minarets, it resembles a bright, miniature Taj Mahal.

Beneath the tiled stones in the main chamber are more than 70 graves, including those of children. They include the grave of Muhatum Ajam’s grandson, Abakh Hoja, a Uyghur aristocrat and spiritual leader who ruled southern Xinjiang for 16 years in the 17th century and is sometimes called the patron saint of Kashgar. Another grave is that of Abakh Hoja’s granddaughter, known to the Chinese as Xiang Fei (Fragrant Consort). Behind the mausoleum is a vast graveyard.

The mausoleum is a half-hour bike ride, a two-hour walk or Y15 taxi ride northeast of town.

TOMB OF YUSUF HAS HAJIB
The striking, blue-and-white tiled, purple-domed mausoleum (Tiyu Lu; admission Y15; ❄️ Beijing time 9am-8.30pm) is a 1993 restoration of a building enlarged many times over the centuries and then smashed up during the Cultural Revolution. It’s Xinjiang’s most important Uyghur monument, though there’s little to see besides the huge, elaborate gravestone inside.

WHERE IS OLD KASHGAR?
Kashgar is again looking like a Central Asian hub, firmly on the tourist trail and with trade links to Pakistan, central China and Central Asia. The ‘town’ has become a city, conceding adobe mosques and Uyghur cemeteries to six-lane avenues and row upon row of high-rises and other ‘modernisations’. For the time being at least, traditional Kashgar is still here if you look for it:

- At the Sunday market and livestock market, of course.
- In the old bazaar – a labyrinth of blacksmiths, carpenters, jewellers, teashops, bakeries and noodle shops. Start at Id Kah Mosque or Noorbish Rd and wander towards Khaskhan Bazaar, also known as Kumdarazza Rd. Through the smoke of numerous kebab stands and the clamber of metal, workmen sip tea on balconies, heads are shaved smooth, hats are fashioned and sold, and caged thrushes sing their hearts out.
- In the pale mud-walled, brick-paved lanes of the restored old town (admission Y10) east of Jiefang Beilu towards the Tuman River, where a network of hushed empty lanes reveal glimpses of traditional houses – some are signposted as open for inspection by tourists, where you will be shown wares for sale.
- Inside Id Kah Mosque.
Yusuf Has Hajib (or Yusup Khas Hajip; c 1019–85) is perhaps the best-known Uyghur scholar, thanks to his *Kutad Kubilik*, or *The Wisdom of Royal Glory*. This encyclopaedic look at Qarakhan political, economic and cultural life, cast in the form of a 13,290-line lyric poem, is a classic of Uyghur literature. He presented it in 1070 to the Qarakhan ruler, who awarded him the title Has Hajib, meaning ‘royal adviser’. Strangely, there is no trace of the original, only very old copies in libraries in Vienna, Cairo and Namangan (Uzbekistan).

**TOMB OF ALI ARSLAN KHAN**

Another historical site is this tomb and small mosque, fairly modest considering they mark the grave of a Qarakhan ruler, Ali Arslan Khan (r 970–98). At the end of Renmin Donglu, go almost a kilometre south. The tomb is in a weedy graveyard of disinterred adobe graves squeezed between advancing armies of Chinese apartments and the road. You may be asked for a few mao donation.

**PEOPLE’S PARK**

South of the Mao statue is People’s Park (Renmin gongyuan; admission Y2), a weedy arboretum with avenues of tall poplars, a horrible little zoo, and Uyghurs playing billiards, chess and shiang chi (Chinese chess). East of the park, 200m down a back lane, is a decaying old tomb, which, according to local people, may have been for a 19th-century imam.

**OLD TOWN WALLS**

At the east end of Seman Lu stands a 10m-high section of the old town walls, at least 500 years old. Another row of them is visible from Yummulakxia Lu. Construction around, on and in them makes access impossible, and there’s clearly no interest in preserving them. Another small section can be seen on the way to East Lake.

**EAST LAKE**

Heading east out along Renmin Donglu is a willow-lined artificial lake, a popular spot for migratory birds and a good spot for a picnic or a peaceful walk among the weeds. In the summer you can rent little boats. Take a ride on the enormous ferris wheel (Y5) for a bird’s-eye view of Kashgar – a sobering image of modern development engulfing the traditional city.

### Sleeping

**BUDGET**

**Sahar Hotel** (☎ 2581122; d Y80) This basic place is popular with Pakistani traders. The tired but adequately clean rooms with TV and hot shower represent pretty good value.

**Chini Bagh Hotel** (☎ 2842299; 144 Seman Lu; dm/d annexe Y50/120, d old/new bldg Y380/480, ste new bldg Y680-880; ☑) The Chini Bagh complex comprises two large towers where the British consulate’s garden and front gate used to be. Reception is found in the ‘new’ building, which is on your right as you enter the gate (it used to be the International Hotel). The budget rooms are in an annexe behind John’s Café. These are adequate; however, the spacious doubles within the ‘old’ building are better value, especially when you (easily) negotiate a discount. Finally, the best rooms are found in the ‘new’ building along with the restaurants, bar and a coffee shop. At the rear of the ‘old’ building is the original consular house, featuring a lack-lustre Uyghur restaurant. The tariff includes a voucher for the unappealing buffet breakfast served in the Chinese restaurant, but you’ll soon be heading down to John’s Café (opposite) for eggs, muesli and coffee. The Chini Bagh accepts major credit cards.

**Seman Hotel** (☎ 2582129; www.semanhotel.com; 337 Seman Lu; dm Y20-30, d Y120-380, ste Y800; ☑) The rambling complex that encompasses all that remains of the old Russian consulate and its compound has a variety of dorms (some with outside bathroom) of two to six beds, some with old Russian bathtubs. Hot water is unpredictable and room security is dubious. Standard doubles with bathroom are overpriced at Y280. There are better doubles (Y380) with vibrant Uyghur-inspired décor. The old consulate has seven individual and rather eccentric doubles and you would need to be a committed Great Game buff to pay for this atmosphere.

**Renmin Hotel** (☎ 2823373; cnr Renmin Donglu & Jiefang Nanlu; s Y128, d Y168-388) The very central ‘Peoples Hotel’ has small, dreary doubles with telephone, TV and bathroom for Y168, and only marginally better doubles for Y218 to Y388. Not the friendliest place in town.

**Tian Nan Hotel** (☎ 2824023; 272 Renmin Donglu; d/ste Y180/220) Although the address is Renmin Donglu (that building was being demolished at the time of writing) the operating hotel is opposite the long-distance bus station.
on Tian Nanlu. The Tian Nan is not a bad budget choice, especially if you have just alighted from a long overland bus trip.

**Overseas Chinese Hotel** (☎ 2588588; Seman Lu; d ¥198) The rooms here are barely acceptable, with cigarette-scalded carpets and accompanying odours. Though they have TV and bathroom, you should negotiate a much better price or move on.

**Qian Hai Hotel** (☎ 2824655; 199 Renmin Xilu; d ¥360-380) Modern Qian Hai is set back from the busy street, and the comfortable doubles are equipped with telephone, TV and bathroom. Customers seem to be largely Chinese business travellers, and very little English is spoken.

**Taxinan Barony Hotel** (☎ 2586888; www.baronyhotels.com; 242 Seman Lu; d ¥580-2680; 🍺) This plush hotel is one of the best in Kashgar, though the best rooms at the Chini Bagh and the discounted rooms at the MWIH represent better value. The Taxinan Barony has very comfortable, spotless doubles with telephone, TV minibar and bathroom. Facilities include an upmarket Chinese restaurant, coffee shop, bar and, perhaps its best asset, large barbecue-and-beer garden.

**Middle & West Asia International Hotel** (MWIH; ☎ 2801111; 8 Renmin Donglu; d ¥680-880) This central high-rise hotel was offering significant (>50%) discounts at the time of research but this may have been because the building was so new. Many rooms looked like they hadn’t even been slept in when we visited and the restaurant was yet to serve a meal. The largish beds were still ‘Chinese firm’ but each room had a big TV, lavish furnishings and a bathtub to luxuriate in.

**Eating & Drinking**

**Opening times for restaurants and cafés use local (Xinjiang) time.**

**RESTAURANTS**

**Old City Restaurant** (Seman Lu; mains ¥4-8) Head to the Old City, next to the Overseas Chinese Hotel, for authentic Uyghur cuisine at local prices. Try Uyghur standards like *laghman* or *fentang* (a savoury soup of meat, vegetables, rice noodles and garlic). Vegetarians can ask for fried vegetables and rice; the rest of us can devour kebabs with cold beer. There’s an English menu thanks to Elvis (see p323).

**En Te Zar** (Kezijingduwei Lu; mains Y5-10; 🍽️ 11am-9pm) This busy Uyghur fast-food restaurant doesn’t have an English menu and no English is spoken, but you can get by pointing at other customers’ dishes or sticking to the delicious barbecued meat and noodles. Monitor the bill though!

**Eversun** (Renmin Xilu; mains ¥10-50; 🍽️ 9am-late) This bright, modern Chinese/Western restaurant boasts about its coffee, which is rather expensive. However, its Chinese lunch boxes, soups and excellent pizzas are worth the splurge. We enjoyed the pizzas and pasta that feature a Xinjiang twist. Finish off with first-rate iced coffee, green tea or ice cream.

**John’s Café** (mains ¥12-45; 🍽️ 8am-late) Both branches of John’s Café serve unadorned travellers’ fare in comfortable relaxed settings. There’s a hefty range of Continental and Chinese dishes from omelettes, chips and pizza to Sichuan chicken. Coffee, juices and smoothies can be followed by beer and spirits.

**Han Can Ting** (Chinese Dining Hall; 144 Seman Lu; mains ¥16-48; 🍽️ 8am-late) This boisterous Chinese restaurant is situated in the Chini Bagh Hotel compound. It has indoor seating but outdoors is the place to be. Enjoy cold beer and good Chinese meals brought by the attentive staff who can arrange nonmenu items such as kebabs from the nearest Uyghur barbecue.

**CAFÉS & QUICK EATS**

The pavements of Yunmulakexia Lu north of Renmin Xilu and the Old Town lanes west of Id Kah Mosque overflow in the evening with Uyghur barbecues and stalls offering good food at minuscule prices. Hygiene is sometimes dubious, but you can’t go wrong dipping your own spoon into hot *laghman*, or *jiaozi* (dumplings in boiling broth).

**Ostangboy Old Teahouse & Dumpling** (Khaskhan Bazaar; 🍽️ 9am-late) The name (meaning riverside) gives an idea of how old this joint is. This is the place to taste the history of Kashgar. Sit on the balcony and sip *dara darmin chai*, sticky-sweet tea with saffron and cardamom. As a tourist you will be fleeced at ¥10 a pot – but worth every kuai.

**Indy’s Café** (Pahti Bazaar Lu; 🍽️ 10am-midnight) Hard to find but worth the effort, Indy’s Café is also not cheap but it’s worth the expense. Indy
does the best espresso in town and you can wash it down with generous helpings of black walnut cake, hot snacks or follow up with a cleansing ale.

Caravan Café (120 Seman Lu) Just outside Chini Bagh’s gate, this long-standing travellers’ oasis with espresso coffee, apple pie and Western breakfasts was closed and undergoing management/ownership changes. Hopefully it has reopened by the time you are reading this.

SELF-CATERING
The best way to eat vegetarian is to self-cater. A small produce market (Yunmulakexia Lu) and an impromptu one outside the bus station on Jeifang Beilu have fresh fruit and vegetables. Early in the morning numerous bakeries churn out stout naan (the flat ones are ak naan, the bagels gzhde). Supermarkets, such as Akeda (Jeifang Beilu), Tian Tian (Seman Lu) and Arman (Jeifang Beilu) have dried fruit, biscuits, ice cream, peanut butter, honey and chocolate bars.

Shopping
SOUVENIRS
Head to the bazaars of the Old Town, along Noorbish Rd and Khaskhan (bamboo steamer) Bazaar. Look for hats, Aladdin lamps, antiques, Mao paraphernalia and handicrafts. Uyghur knives with colourfully inlaid handles are a big favourite with tourists, but don’t try to fly out of Kashgar with them in your hand luggage! The Sunday market has a depressing line-up of animal pelts, including those from dogs. Some are thankfully fake, but it is not unknown to see pelts from endangered animals. The citizens of Kashgar have been selling things for over 2000 years, so be ready to bargain.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS
Beautiful long-necked stringed instruments run the gamut from junk to collector’s items. They include the two-string dutar, larger three-string khomuz, small tambur and elaborately shaped ravap with five strings and a lizard-skin sounding board. The small reed horn is a sunai, or surnai. A dab is a type of tambourine. Two shops south of the mosque on Khaskhan Bazaar sell these plus miniature tourist versions.

CARPETs
There are a few dealers in the Old Town and some bargains in small shops, but most have moved out to the Sunday market pavilion. Regionally, the best carpets are said to be in Hotan but to recognise what’s good and what’s not seek local advice from an experienced dealer such as Ablimit Ghopor aka Elvis (☎ 13899136195; elvisablimit@yahoo.com).

Getting There & Away
AIR
At least five flights a day go to/from Ürümqi for Y1230. Try to book at least a week ahead in summer, with Hainan Airways (www.hnair.com) or China Southern (☎ 2980288; www.cs-air.com; Seman Lu). China Southern has the most flights per day and at least one sales assistant at the Kashgar office speaks good English. The travel agencies listed on p323 can also help with ticketing. China Southern also flies to/from Islamabad each Saturday. The fare is about US$250 plus taxes.

Flights are occasionally cancelled because of wind or sandstorms (it happened to us!). In this case you could easily spend less money and arrive sooner on a fast bus or the train. If your flight is cancelled, just show up for the next available flight and you get priority; there’s no need to change the ticket. But you will need to change any ticket for a connecting flight out of Ürümqi. Your airline should provide this assistance as well as assistance in finding stand-by accommodation in Ürümqi.

BUS
Most buses to regional towns and cities depart from the long-distance bus station (Tian Nanlu; ☏ 9.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm). Ticket window Nos 1 to 3 are for Yengisar, Yarkand, Yecheng (Qarghillik), Hotan, Tashkurgan and Ürümqi. However, the buses to Ürümqi leave from the international bus station (Jeifang Beilu), and if you are going to Kara Kul (Y43) or Tashkurgan (Y63) you should use the bus heading to Sost (see below). There have been instances of theft and pack slashing at the bus stations, so keep an eye on your bags.

Pakistan
The starting point for the 500km bus trip to Sost (Y270) is the international bus station (Jeifang Beilu), north of the bridge over the Tuman River. Departure is 11am local time.

The trip takes at least 1½ to two days with an overnight stop in Tashkurgan. Sit on the left-hand side for the overall best views. Drivers like to put luggage on the roof, so carry on-board water, snacks and warm
clothes, as nights can be cold in any season. Unplanned stops and flat tyres are not unheard of. Landslides in the Ghez Valley can cancel departures at any time of year but especially in July and August. Customs inspections take place in Tashkurgan.

Die-hards can hop onto the air-con Natco bus for a nonstop 14-plus-hour trip to Gilgit (Y350), departing at 7.30am local time Monday to Saturday; at the time of research, passengers could take this bus only as far as Sost or Passu. This rule is expected to change.

An alternative is to hire a minibus to Sost – still a two-day trip with sightseeing at Kara Kul and Tashkurgan. All the travel agencies listed on p323 can arrange it; eg CITS charges Y3000 for up to nine passengers in a minibus.

Seats as far as Tashkurgan on the Kashgar to Sost bus are sold on a stand-by basis for Y63, but you run a small risk of finding no seat on a later bus to Sost.

Ürümqi
You can make the 1480km, 24-hour trip to Ürümqi in a nonstop ‘sleeper’ bus (Uyghur: qarvatlik mashina; Chinese: wopoche) for Y210/196 in an upper/lower berth. These buses depart every hour from the international bus station (Jeifang Beilu). Buy tickets one to two hours before departure, though it is also possible to barter directly with the drivers for cheaper fares.

Kyrgyzstan
You must already have a Kyrgyzstan visa. There are two road passes into Kyrgyzstan: the Irkeshtam, which leads to Osh, and the Torugart, which leads to Bishkek. Getting to Osh is straightforward, with a bus (US$50, two days) leaving the international bus station on Mondays at 10am.

There is also a bus to Bishkek (US$50) but because the Torugart Pass is designated ‘secondary’ it’s not possible for independent foreigners to travel on the bus all the way to Bishkek. To get to Bishkek it’s best to use one of the Kashgar travel agencies (see p323) which can organise the necessary permits and transport. CITS charges US$150, which includes a ‘guide’, permit and transport for up to three passengers to Naryn. Onward transport to Bishkek costs roughly US$160.

Via the Irkeshtam Pass no permit is needed. CITS charges US$200 to cover the 260km Chinese section in a minibus plus US$60 for the Kyrgyzstan connection to Osh.

Tibet
The road trip to Lhasa via Ali requires permits, a hefty wallet and unusual stamina for the long, lonely roads – but it can be done. All the necessary paperwork (including a permit from the army) and transport can be organised by CITS or John’s Café (see p323).

HITCHING
You might hitch a lift between Kashgar and Tashkurgan, but expect waits of anything from hours to days. You won’t save much money as drivers expect something equivalent to the bus fare. From Tashkurgan to Pakistan, you’ll have to wait for an empty seat on a bus.

TRAIN
The train station is several kilometres east of town though you can buy tickets at counters 4 and 5 at the long-distance bus station (Tian Nanlu; 9.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm). A taxi costs about Y10, or catch local bus 28 from the Mao statue on Renmin Donglu.

There is a hard sleeper train to Ürümqi (Y180, 28 hours) but the air-con sleeper is faster (Y350, 22 hours). Departures are daily; the fast train leaves at 4.50pm (Beijing time) and the slow train leaves at 9.30am.

Getting Around
TO/FROM THE AIRPORT
A bus (costing Y5) leaves from the Civil Aviation Administration of China Office (CAAC; 2822113; 95 Jeifang Nanlu) 2½ hours before each flight departure, and one meets each incoming flight. A taxi is about Y15. ‘Airport’ is aydrum in Uyghur, feijichang in Chinese.

BICYCLE RENTAL
John’s Café (fax 2581186; Seman Lu) rents bikes for Y20 per day.

BUS
Useful routes include bus 2 (Jeifang Lu to the airport), 9 (international bus station to the Chini Bagh Hotel and Seman Hotel) and 28 (Renmin Donglu to the train station). The fare is Y1.

TAXI
The usually friendly drivers of the lime green taxis disregard their meters and charge Y5
around the town and the Sunday market, Y10 to the livestock market and train station, and Y15 to the airport.

**AROUND KASHGAR**

**Three-Immortals Caves**

Twenty kilometres north of Kashgar is one of the area’s few traces of the flowering of Buddhism, the Three-Immortals (San Xian) Caves. These are three grottoes high on a sandstone cliff, in one of which you can make out some peeling frescoes. The cliff is too sheer to climb, so it’s a bit of a disappointment.

**Ha Noi & Mor Pagoda**

At the end of a jarring 35km drive northeast of town are the ruins of Ha Noi, a Tang-dynasty town built in the 7th century and abandoned in the 12th. Little remains except for a great, solid, pyramid-like structure and the huge Mor ‘Pagoda’ (stupa).

**Artush**

Artush, or Artux (Chinese: Atushi), an hour’s drive northeast of Kashgar, is a Kyrgyz market town and the centre of Kyzylsu Kyrgyz Autonomous County. It has a large bazaar, heavy on cloth and clothing. It’s famous locally for figs, best in late summer or early autumn. Also here is the 10th-century tomb of Sultan Sutuq Bughra Khan of the Qarakhan dynasty, the first local ruler to convert to Islam.

Minibuses to Artush (Y26) congregate in a field southeast of the Jeifang Beili bridge over the Tuman River in Kashgar, near the international bus station. The official foreigners’ hotel in Artush is Kejou Binguan.

**Yarkand & Hotan**

These and other towns southeast of Kashgar were stops on a Silk Road branch along the south side of the Taklamakan Desert, and from time to time were also mini kingdoms. Yarkand, four hours from Kashgar, has a small indoor Sunday bazaar.

The craftspeople of Hotan were celebrated throughout Asia for their rugs, silk and carved jade, and to some extent they still are. The 4th-century Chinese pilgrim Fa Hsien described Hotan as a highly developed centre of Buddhism, with no fewer than 14 large monasteries. Hotan, 12 hours from Kashgar by bus, has a Sunday market to rival Kashgar’s; smaller but without the tourists.

**SLEEPING**

Hotels are pretty spartan. In Yarkand foreigners end up at the Shache Binguan (Hotel Yarkand; % 8512365; s/d Y120/280).

Hetian Yingbinguan (Hotel Hotan; % 2022824; dm/d Y20/190) The official tourist hotel in Hotan provides hot showers and reliable accommodation for foreigners.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

From Kashgar’s long-distance bus station (Tian Nanlu; 9.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm), buses go frequently to Yarkand (Y37, three hours). Buses to Hotan (sleeper/nonsleeper Y85/65, eight to 10 hours) are less frequent. When buying tickets, use the Chinese names: Shache for Yarkand, and Hetian for Hotan.