





The road to Shimshal follows the Shimshal River, which is formed from water from the Khurdopin Glacier, Shimshal Pass, and Zardgorban.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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NOTES FROM PAKISTAN

Not counting the Qatar flight attendants, I am one of three women on the entire, fully booked plane from Doha to Islamabad. I'm upgraded to first class at the gate when boarding.

A few hours later, we land in Islamabad. After exiting customs into the baggage claim area, a young man greets me with an American accent. He wears a light blue shirt and pin-dotted tie. "Excuse me," he says, "are you from the U.S. embassy?" "No, no I'm not," I answer. "Just here as a tourist." "Good luck," he says.

At the baggage carousel, my bicycle, in its black canvas padded bag, is one of the first things to appear, circling the track slowly. My backpack takes much longer. A woman standing next to me with a cart asks what's in the bag. She wears a dark green and blue headscarf and pale blue tunic. Her eyes are the same blue as the tunic and remind me of the sky on a warm summer's day. One of those days when everything seems good and true and nothing could possibly bring you down.

"A bike," I tell her. "I'm going to cycle the Karakoram Highway." "How wonderful," she says. "Now is a good time. So beautiful. And welcome, you are welcome here in Pakistan." I look into the sky in her eyes and think maybe this isn't such a bad idea after all.

It's hard for me to put into words why I wanted to go to Pakistan. I don't know how to tell people that the world isn't quite as frightening as they think it is, that I have some silly romantic notion that two people having a conversation in an airport can bridge a gap, can mean *something*.

A woman sits next to me as we wait for the flight to Gilgit. She's dressed in beautiful shades of yellow and orange, a geometric print, her eyes clear and curious. "I, too, am going to Gilgit," she says. "The mountains are beautiful. You are welcome here in Pakistan."

After the airport, I don't see very many women at all. In the streets of Gilgit, the absence of the female form is palpable. I am a bright, shining beacon; a spotlight follows me everywhere. I am large and conspicuous but, at the same time, a shadow.

I SPEND ALMOST three weeks cycling the Karakoram Highway in northern Pakistan with six white men from various countries, including the U.S., Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. During those three weeks, we see few Pakistani women. We have a local male guide and his male assistant and multiple male drivers. Our local tour guide leader tells us that wearing shorts while cycling is perfectly acceptable. He tells us that people will be more surprised to see cyclists on the road than they will be to see us (the men and me) in shorts. We are anomalies in northern Pakistan. White people don't come here much anymore, especially since that incident a couple of years ago when some hikers were killed and some countries, like the U.S., issued travel advisories.

Our hotel in Gilgit is a long, low building with a large, well-maintained yard. There isn't any air conditioning, but our rooms have ceiling fans that can be cranked up so high I think it might be possible for my room to take flight. And there is wifi. We soon discover that it works best when seated in one particular chair on the front porch. We call that chair "the hot seat" and take turns occupying it.

Our first bike ride in Pakistan is a short 26-kilometer loop from our hotel out of Gilgit to see a Buddha statue. I brought my cyclocross bike because I don't own a mountain or touring bike. Everyone else has mountain bikes. I think maybe I should've brought a mountain bike.

My cyclocross bike isn't really geared for climbing mountains but I manage anyway. I inch my way up a steep, short, gravelly incline toward the Kargah Buddha, a three-meter statue carved into a cliff face. I'm almost to the top when a motorbike carrying three young men speeds past and then turns sharply right in front of me. The bike and its riders go down. I'm going so slowly, it's easy to stop. The young men get up, laughing and sheepish. They apologize, still laughing, brush the dirt from their jeans, and continue on foot, pushing the bike.

The Karakoram Highway, also known as the China-Pakistan Friendship Highway, is a well-



On the road to Shimshal, my friend and fellow cyclist Mark stops for a photo (and some shade).

maintained, wide paved road that runs from Islamabad to the Khunjerab Pass at the Chinese border. The 1,300-kilometer highway was completed in 1979 after 20 years of construction. Many of the areas off the Karakoram Highway require special trekking permits from the Pakistan government. Aman, our guide, carries multiple copies of all of our names and passports and visa numbers that he provides to officers at each security checkpoint. And there are many of them, manned by soldiers in uniform, low gates slung across the road that have to be lifted manually.

On the third day, our destination is the Bagrote Valley, reachable via a rocky unpaved section of road off the highway. Before the turn-off, we stop on the shoulder to take some pictures, look again with awe at the mountains all around us. Two men on a motorcycle stop to talk. Most everyone in Pakistan speaks English as well as their local language.

"Where are you going?" they ask. We tell them Bagrote. One of them wearing a bright blue hoodie shakes his head and says, "No, that is not possible. The road to Bagrote, I think it is too troublesome. Not possible by bike."

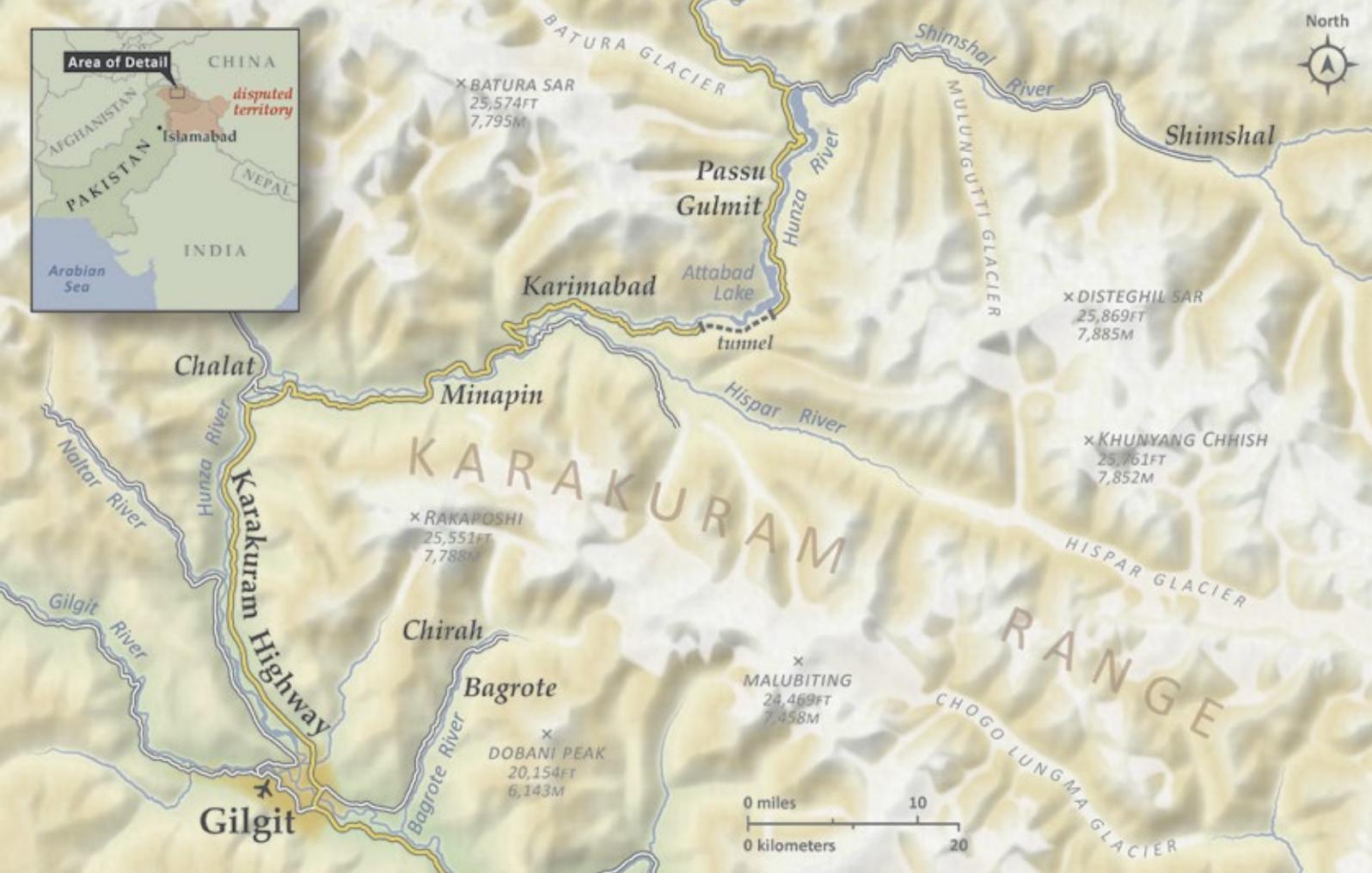
We of course go anyway. We spend the night in Chirah, at a campsite overlooking the valley. There is no running water. I rinse off in the cold, cold waters of the river flowing from the glaciers. The night is silent and cool and filled with stars. There is peace here in the valley. In the morning, the school children gather across the river from our site to get a look at us. They

are dressed in uniform — grey pants, white shirts, and blue vests. They smile and wave until they are ushered away and scolded by a couple of adults.

The farther into the mountains we go, the less inclined people seem to observe the clothing customs of the larger cities. Women walk along the side of the road, their headscarves pushed down to their shoulders, dark hair spilling down their backs. Ramadan begins but many of the people we encounter aren't strict observers of it.

On our way down from Chirah, we stop at a sewing school in Karak. The men take photos of the women students who pose next to their machines. I try to talk with them, showing them pictures of my sewing machines at work. I work as a tailor and pattern maker for film and television. Sewing is a universal connector, an unexpected bridge between my world and theirs.

Karimabad is this fantastical village built along an impossibly steep, narrow, winding road that begins as pavement and ends as cobbles. Small shops line the sides, fitted into the mountain as if they were simply born there. One restaurant, two stories with a surround balcony, serves french fries better than I've had in any western country — and I'm a connoisseur of the french fry. I've been super sick with a wicked stomach virus for the three days leading up to Karimabad and those french fries are the first food I'm able to keep down in as many days. Maybe that's why they taste so good. At the very top of the town is a fort with a view to rival only that of the gods.



After Karimabad, we head up again, deeper into the Hunza region.

About 10 or 11 days into our trip, we spend the night in Shimshal, the highest settlement in the Hunza region and the last village in Pakistan before the Chinese border.

The road to Shimshal is one of those unpaved, rocky, dirt, sand, winding mountain roads. What it lacks in guardrails, it makes up for in river crossings. The road is breathtaking and frightening.

I only cry a couple of times in between stopping to uncramp my hands and take photos of the rocky landscape. Aside from our two support jeeps, there is no other traffic on the road. I'm not as fast or as confident on the rocks as the guys so I end up cycling alone for most of the way. Sometimes I stop to rest and look out over the cliffs. This is what I imagine cycling on another planet would be like.

Riding into Shimshal, children appear on the side of the road to greet me. They are shy and curious. Some of them wave, some hide their faces when I wave back.

While hanging around waiting for dinner to be ready, I hear the sounds of more kids playing nearby. I've been to many countries and the sound of children playing is the same no matter what language they speak. I walk out to the edge of the guesthouse yard and climb on top of a rock wall to get a view of the field next to the school. A soccer match is in progress.

Young girls watch from both ends of the field, as well as adults who gather near my perch. The match is eventually interrupted by a herd of yaks that plod slowly into the midst of the action. The kids abandon the game to steer the direction of the yaks.

After Shimshal, we start our journey back down the mountains, heading again toward Gilgit.

A day later, at the Marco Polo Inn in Gulmit, I lie on the rose-printed cover of a twin bed. It's a corner room with windows overlooking the garden and the along the parking lot edges. I'm weary from cycling — not from the actual pedaling but from the local men who stare at me but never make

I PUSH THE PLAY BUTTON ON "RISE UP" BY ANDRA DAY. THEN I CLICK THE REPEAT BUTTON. THE SONG IS AN ANTHEM TO ME, AN ANTHEM TO EVERY REPRESSED WOMAN AND HUMAN EVERYWHERE, TO ALL THE PLACES SCARRED BY GOVERNMENT AGGRESSION, TO ALL THE REMOTE MOUNTAIN VILLAGES AND PEOPLE WHO PERSEVERE IN SPIRE OF AND DESPITE IT ALL.

eye contact; even my six male cycling companions can't resist the urge to give me constant "advice" that despite their best intentions is unhelpful and demoralizing. I feel outnumbered and lost, a bit like an intruder, an unwelcome visitor crashing a club I



The fields of Shimshal Village from above as we approached on the road. After hours of gray rock and dirt, the green oasis was striking — and kind of magical.

could never in a million years be a member of. I fear my voice has grown even quieter. I try to speak but there are no words. My legs are jelly. Horrific pieces of white jiggly stuff. Obtrusive.

I put my headphones in and scroll through the music that's actually downloaded to my phone (internet is extremely spotty in northern Pakistan).

I push the play button on "Rise Up" by Andra Day. Then I click the repeat button. The song is an anthem to me, an anthem to every repressed woman and human everywhere, to all the places scarred by government aggression, to all the remote mountain villages and people who persevere in spite of and despite it all. And it's my own little anthem, an American pedaling her bike in a conservative Muslim country that people advise against visiting.

By some miracle, the Marco Polo has hot water with water pressure that can almost knock you over. "It comes from the mountain springs," says the owner.

I listen to "Rise Up" for almost two hours, maybe three. I don't move from my spot on the bed until Julian knocks on the door and yells, "Dinner!"

And then I rise up and walk across the garden filled with roses and ligustrum bushes to eat dinner with a table full of men at a restaurant and hotel run by men in a small village deep in the Hunza region. But now

LIKE MOST PEOPLE, I ONLY REALLY KNOW WHAT IS REPORTED IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA, AND MUCH OF WHAT I, IN THE PAST, HAVE IMAGINED LIFE TO BE LIKE IN OTHER COUNTRIES BESIDES MY OWN COMES FROM HOW THEY ARE DEPICTED IN AMERICAN MOVIES AND TELEVISION SHOWS.

my voice doesn't shake, my legs don't wobble, and I know who I am. I'm a white woman cycling the Karakoram Mountains in Pakistan.

We continue down the mountains, passing through the same villages as on the way up. The Karakoram

Highway is the only road in Northern Pakistan; there isn't any opportunity for variation.

I feel strong, yet tired and a bit weary. I feel guilty for wishing for a hot shower with intense water pressure, for dreaming of air conditioning. I'm dusty. There's dust in my eyelids and my fingernails. My bike is covered with dried mud and the dust of a million rocks. My hair is coarse, sand-washed, full of knots. I feel lucky for the opportunity to take this trip, and I can't believe I made it the whole way. At the same time, I can't believe it's almost over.

In Islamabad, on our second-to-last evening, we all go to dinner in the new restaurant on the top floor of the Islamabad Grand Hotel. I'm the only woman in the full dining room. I'm almost used to it now and am pleasantly surprised when the waiter asks me directly what I want to drink.

NORTHERN PAKISTAN (especially Shimshal) and the Karakoram Mountains are one of the most beautiful places I have ever been. I feel lucky to have had the opportunity to visit and hope that, in the future, others will too. I don't know how to tell people exactly what it was like or how things now, at home, feel slippery and off-kilter. I'm bombarded with white-people problems and first-world problems — yesterday, I watched two perfectly nice people dump out full bottles of drinking water because it'd been in the plastic bottle on their bike for a few hours and was no longer cold. All I could think of, the only thing I could focus on, were all those people teeming around Islamabad with big plastic bottles of water that was only cold if they were lucky and had happened to charm the man at the cookie shop to the point that he handed over his last quart bottle of cold water for free.

In one of the mountain villages, there was an American flag painted in the middle of the road, and below it were the words "Death to America." I pedaled my bicycle right over it, barely blinking an eye. The men on the side of the road waved as I went by. Waved and said hello.

I have no defense. No defense for drone strikes and other acts of war.

I can't pretend to know what goes on in the minds of humans who are taxed with protecting countries and civilizations. Like most people, I only really know what is reported in mainstream media, and much of what I, in the past, have imagined life to be like in other countries besides my own comes from how they are depicted in American movies and television shows. I work in the entertainment business; I know what makes marketable entertainment and it isn't nuance, compassion, or exploring ideas outside the dominant paradigm.

The fear of the unknown and of what's been learned only through the lens of news cycles and blockbuster hits is palatable. I saw it in the eyes and the tone of every single person (except two, if I'm honest, two out of 60 or 70) at home when I told them where I was going. I can't speak to how the Pakistanis feel about America or Americans in general, but I was never afraid while there. People, in general, seemed welcoming. I was occasionally uncomfortable, but never actually afraid.

I don't seek out danger. I really don't. It's the diversity of landscape and people that calls to me. In experiencing a shared moment with a stranger is the discovery that, despite our governments, we can still find common ground. This sort of winsomeness I find over and over again. I can't heal people's xenophobia or make Americans back home less scared of places they'd never been. I maybe can't even heal myself, but I can try. 🇵🇰

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Ed. note: Special thanks to Nasir Hussain at Explore Karakoram for his help with fact checking the names, locations, and boundaries of this route. Please email nasirekk@yahoo.com to learn more about cycling in Pakistan.



NUTS & BOLTS

▶ pakistan

The trip I took was organized by Red Spokes Cycling Tours (redspokes.co.uk), owned by Dermot Macward, a Scottish man who is always a pleasure to talk to and who fell in love with Pakistan decades ago. The local tour operator (as Americans, you need to be with a guide in the north) was Explore Karakoram (explorekarakoram.com), run by Nasir Hussain — he, too, is always willing to talk and answered my endless questions about Pakistan.

This tour is the Cycle Karakoram Highway, Bagrote, and Shimshal tour.

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