



Last Trip to the Khyber Pass

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The Khyber Pass: quite honestly the name alone did it for me. A legendary journey such people as Genghis Khan and Alexander the Great traveled. Even now, the journey from Pakistan to

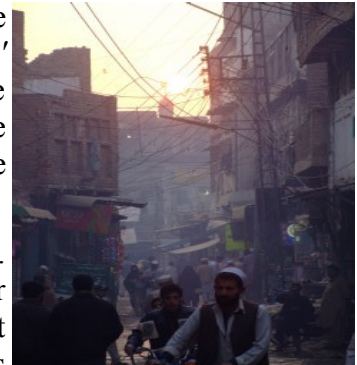


Afghanistan is heavy in magnitude. War, gun running, smuggling, and just about every other reason most tourists would avoid the place like the plague. For me it was the perfect place en route through Pakistan. What's more Pakistan was in Emergency Rule, the army were everywhere, and permits were getting harder due to tribal conflicts in the area. No better time to visit.

I had arrived in Peshawar city and had spent a few days exploring its incredible sights and sounds. It had tourist spots, albeit few, and no tourists. But for me the real charm lay in its

people and the sheer . An ethnic mix of Pakistani's and Afghans.

The only way to travel the Khyber pass is with a permit. One only obtainable from the Office of National Affairs. You could do it by yourself, but, they were officially not handing them out anymore due to recent disturbances. It meant my guide having a little one on one conversation, and handing over a one hundred rupee '*rush*' fee. A few photocopies later and we were on our way. A hired taxi drove us to our next stop, the Khyber Guards Police station. A tribal police station where a mandatory armed guard was assigned to you. We were after all about to enter a lawless land.



The area between Peshawar and Afghanistan is know as the tribal lands. A place where tribal warlords ruled. Here neither the police, nor pakistani army have any jurisdiction what so ever. I often think the rest of the world does not understand it when wondering why Pakistan is often linked to trouble in this area. I would discover more later.

We set off in our little yellow taxi and I was truly hyped up with the journey ahead. We passed



through some local towns along a dusty road towards the Khyber

Gates. The official border with the Tribal lands. It was here our armed escort really

became a bit

of an ass hole. He obviously did not want to be there, and took little interest in anything.



Thankfully my guide at least took the time to show me around the not so exciting gate. It was no more than a meeting place for towns folk to meet. At least, to me. I was about to overlook the best part of this journey.

Our taxi took off again, this time passing through light rocky desert tundra. Alongside the dusty road here corrugated rooftop store fronts. Here it wasn't milk power nor water they sold. Here they sold whole sale weaponry. Ak 47's by the dozen, or maybe a single pistol for a single job. Grenades, mortars, not a problem. Discounts available. Next door it was a different kind of merchandise. Hashish by the ounce, kilo, or bale. Opium for export and cocaine for retail.



We drove on along the desert road passing fort like compounds, complete with ramparts and gun slots. Some were relatively small, maybe enough to house six three bedroom houses. Others were huge, maybe over a block in some cases, and in one case several blocks. Aside from being marked with gun towers, rifle slots and bullet holes the most menacing thing about the forts were the large graveyards outside each one. Graveyards in place of gardens.

"This is where the tribal wars happen," explained my guide. "Fights break out between families and warlords. They fortify their houses in case of fighting. And, by the bullet holes you can see it happens quite a lot."

"What do they fight over?" I asked, not realizing my ignorance.

"Drugs, money, just about everything that's shipped along here."

I sat back and looked out the window. The Khyber pass may have been a famous trade route hundreds of years ago and been written as such into history, but time had not changed much. Kings had been replaced by warlords, spices, camels and jewelry by drugs, cars and guns. This was a modern day trade route set on old principals. Outside we were now deep in valley gorge. Huge trucks laden down with bags of food roared by. An incredible amount of brand new sports cars tore by at an even higher speed.



"Drug Lords" mentioned my guide.



I looked at some of the custom number plates 'Pak007' was a white Porsche, 'Iamgrt' Lexus. It was all quite surreal. I then noted the large 4x4 escorts waiting in the wings. Whenever one of the sports cars would move, the escorts would always follow. Alongside the road beggars stood or sat hands outstretched and women mined the walls of the Valley.

We passed by a washed out bridge and tore down a dirt road. Coming into view alongside us was the old Khyber railway. It's brown racks camouflaging well into the high valley face surrounding us. It hadn't been operational in years. Then as



the Khyber Railway tracks disappeared into the a rocky mountain tunnel we reached the Khyber Rifle's look out point. Up ahead lay Afghanistan.

A duo of military types from the actual look out post invited us up to their lookout point for a better look. They had rows of confiscated weapons out on display.



Mortars, heavy machine guns, rifles, grenades and what I hoped were disarmed missiles. I



I looked down at the dusty vista that opened up before us. The start of Afghanistan was marked by a mountainous hill where an old palace was perched. Rather unusually it looked like the rectangular wing of the palace was falling down one of the sides of the hill. It turned out that this was the prison section of the palace; and it had been built like that on purpose. Doomed prisoners would be thrown down perpendicular corridors into waiting swords at the bottom.

My guide was engrossed in deep conversation with the guards. At first it was all about who I was and the how's and why's I was there. Then my guide told me why there were asking so many questions. Apparently a Turkish man had been kidnapped the day before right on the border. His



driver and guards shot. The Turk was taken away into the



surrounding mountains, and they are still awaiting news. I looked up at the mountains around the border. They were as good as sheer cliff faces, and I found it hard to imagine taking anyone up there as part of a rushed kidnapping.

Then more news. A German had been killed in Peshawar market. This time it was not so subtle. He was a drug smuggler. Crossed the wrong person. And had been dissected in the central market as an example to others that it could happen to anyone. My journey to the Khyber Pass was not an action packed adventure. The drive itself is not so exciting. Sheer cliffs and dry monotonous sandy colors did little to inspire. But, it was what had happened in the past, and what was happening now on the legendary pass that made it so very special a place. Only a day later back in Peshawar my guide contacted me. All trips to the Khyber Pass were now off limits to travellers. It seemed we'd been the last to make the journey, for now at least.



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