

In 1987, the world was a very different place and adventure travel was feasible in many parts that have since become war torn or infested with terrorist factions. One such region was North West Pakistan where the initial phase of the Great Karakoram Highway was cutting its way through the Hindu Kush mountains on its way to the Khyber Pass. The Khyber Pass had, for centuries, been the primary route that connected Pakistan and Afghanistan. So when an opportunity arose to join a group of adventurers spending a week in the area, I spent less time thinking about it than it has just taken me to write this sentence. I signed up along with about fifteen other people who were of a similar mindset.

Most adventure tales do not start at the end of the trip, but that is the case here. We had spent a fascinating week touring the area with a Pakistani Government guide in three old jeeps, which were probably the most reliable vehicles for hundreds of miles. On the morning of our scheduled departure, the group gathered in the hotel lobby with a little more luggage than when we had arrived.

Our guide joined us and announced “Excuse me, I have some bad news. Today’s incoming flight from Rawalpindi was cancelled due to bad weather. We need to extend your stay here in Gilgit until tomorrow. You are free to spend the day exploring Gilgit, but you should not leave the main part. I would recommend that you stay in groups. We should plan on being ready to depart tomorrow morning at this same time. If you need me at any time, I will be here at the hotel.”

Luckily, we had not checked out of the hotel and it only took us a few minutes to dump our luggage back in our rooms. We were free to wander the markets, which we had wanted to do as each day had been spent touring around the area without much time in the town Gilgit itself.

The following morning, we congregated in the lobby again. We did not need to hear our guides words as the look on his face indicated a problem as he approached the group. Indeed, that day’s flight had also

been cancelled. Now, you may be wondering why we could not take an alternate route back to Rawalpindi. It was simple: there was none – this was a one flight a day type of town.

Let me explain a few details about the flight. It was scheduled once a day and there were no other flights to or from Gilgit. Back at that time, the flight was reputed to be one of the most cancelled and turned back flights in the world. Roughly a third of scheduled flights failed to leave Rawalpindi and of those that did take off, a significant number of them turned back before flying over the main mountain range. The flight had to navigate through a narrow mountain pass where the small commercial jet had to fly at its maximum ceiling and it then had just 500 feet clearance over the pass. It truly had been breath taking to view the ice and rock faces that soared high above the plane as we had flown into Gilgit. Those freezing rock and ice walls had felt so close to the plane's wingtips.

But our guide did not send us off to explore on our own again. "I am not certain when flights will resume with this storm raging in our flight path. I think it will be better if I commandeer the daily bus that goes to Rawalpindi." Being a Government Guide he had some level of authority and could take over the bus, in such circumstances.

One of the group asked "How long will it take to drive all that way?"

"Around twenty to twenty-four hours or so, depending on conditions" the guide replied in a way that made it sound so normal.

We sat in the lobby for a hour or so while the guide made arrangements. Then we trudged across to a small muddy yard on the edge of town. There, half a dozen buses were parked with many locals scurrying around loading goods on the luggage racks that were mounted on the bus roofs. One bus sat empty – it was ours. It looked like it had been built back just after World War II and it had been enthusiastically decorated and painted. Each of the buses had been decorated in its own unique style and they were all extremely colorful and bright, despite their thick layering of baked-on mud..

Our luggage was hauled onto the roof and tied down under a tarpaulin. Inside, we found the interior seating to be even less comfortable than the average school bus. This was going to be a very long drive. We pulled out coats and anything we could find to pad the seats, but nothing helped to alleviate the unrelenting vertical stance of the seat backs. We settled in, impressed by the lack of concern for comfort in the bus's design. It had been constructed in hardier days, long gone by.

The driver arrived and had a few words with our guide before settling into his seat at the controls. The group's discomfort with the seating was quickly displaced by concerns that the driver appeared to be of an age that way surpassed that of the bus itself. However, he had a small assistant to run errands for him. But the assistant gave us no reason for confidence as he seemed to have been born at a time after air was last put in the bus's tires.

The fact that our guide was not reacting to our situation was the only reason for the group's not freaking out.

The bus's engine spluttered into life on the third attempt. I do not recall if I sensed relief with it starting or foreboding. I suspect it was a time for "Oh well, here we go." Our driver slammed it into gear and let up on the clutch. We were returning to civilization.

To my surprise, the road heading South was well paved and in quite good state considering the conditions. Our route took us across large expanses of glacial deposits heading for the mountains we needed to cross. After several hours, we had made our way over one mountain pass and begun to wind down beautiful valleys that were exposed to a more varied climate. Heavier clouds hung over our route and soon we were hit by scattered rain squalls that crossed our path.

The group started to relax and take time to enjoy the views through the bus's misting windows. However, every once in a while we had reason to refocus on the road and our driver when he took one of the many

hairpins a little too fast. Feeling the bus's back wheels skidding towards a thousand-foot drop was just a little concerning. A couple of the group members asked our guide to request the driver slow down. The ensuing discussion between the guide and driver seemed to have little effect, except for some blustering outbursts by the driver and laughter between he and his assistant.

After an hour or so, the rain showers stopped and, thankfully, so did the skidding of the back wheels. Life was better: we could relax and enjoy the scenery of the lower valleys of the Hindu Kush. We had been on the road for about four hours or so. Rawalpindi was still a long way ahead of us but it was in our grasp. In those four hours, we had probably seen about twenty other vehicles. So when we rounded a curve and found a line of traffic at a halt on the road, we wondered what could be the problem.

The guide told the driver to turn the engine off after a few minutes as exhaust fumes were permeating the interior of the bus. He said "Please stay on the bus while I take a walk to see what could be the problem."

He returned about five minutes later with a concerned look on his face "It looks like the storm has brought a landslide down on the road and traffic cannot pass. Some of the drivers who drive the road regularly say the army will bring a bulldozer to clear it."

We all wanted to see the problem and insisted that our guide let us walk down the road with him. He had some reservations but agreed. There were about a dozen or more trucks and cars ahead of us in the line. And then there was the problem: about a fifty-yard stretch of the road was covered with mud, rocks and vegetation. On the far side of the slide, there was a line of traffic that had been driving up to Gilgit. Alongside the first few vehicles, groups of drivers had gathered, sitting on their haunches, smoking and talking. They seemed totally happy to sit and wait, no matter how long it took the army to come and clear the road. Several of our group took a meander through the landslide's debris on the road. When they rejoined the rest of us, they said that they did not see that much of a problem as the landslide was mainly mud and relatively small rocks. So, most of us took a walk through the area and quickly concluded that we could clear a path wide enough for the bus and trucks in an hour or two.

We found the largest rocks that were in the way of clearing a path while a couple of people found some tree branches in the debris. Soon enough, the largest rocks were being pushed or leveraged towards the edge of the road. The local drivers watched us with slightly amused contempt. After a little struggle the two biggest rocks sat on the very edge of the road. We gave them a final shove and they started a long bouncing decent into the wild valley that lay a far distance below us. As they dropped, we cheered and whistled as their descent seemed to continue for such a long time.

The group split into pairs to start hurling the smaller rocks and branches over the side of the road. It was good to start actually moving after hours on the bone shaking bus. It soon became a competition as to whose rock dropped the furthest, which led to enthusiastic shouts and cheering. This was too much for the complacent local drivers: they had to join the fun. But their sense of personal space and safety were less than desirable. Very quickly, the situation began to resemble a war scene with rocks flying indiscriminately but thankfully there were no fallen heroes when victory was finally ours. We had managed to clear a path through the debris, wide enough for one way traffic.

We threaded our way through the cleared path and were under way again. We had taken less than two hours, which was so much better than opting to wait for the army. Our progress down through the green valleys that were spotted with small groups of trees and occasional farms seemed to be back on track. The group relaxed back into their padded cocoons on the seats that seemed to become harder with each passing mile.

The weather brightened as did our spirits. So, when we encountered another line of halted traffic, we felt a little betrayed. But at the same time, the group immediately went into an energized state, anticipating tackling a second landslide – we were ready. Our guide sensed that he could not hold us on the bus and let the group forge ahead to survey the obstacle. We had guessed correctly that it was indeed a second landslide. It was a little bigger than the first, but the size of the boulders were of a magnitude that

seemed to dwarf the level of ability that we had shown a short time before. It was quickly apparent that this was army bulldozer time.

Disappointed, we explained the situation to our guide and left him to talk with the bus driver. They made their decision based on their experience of how long the army may take to clear the road. We all re-boarded the bus.

Our guide addressed us “As you saw, we are not able to clear this slide so we will be returning to Gilgit and we shall await the next flight. I am sorry, but I needed to make a decision that keeps you all safe.”

The mention of our safety immediately prompted us all to hurry off the bus as our driver started up the engine. He intended doing a multi-point turnaround on a road that was barely wider than the bus was long and there was a significant drop off one side with absolutely no safety railing. Ten minutes later we did applaud our driver for turning the bus around in the most improbable of circumstances.

We re-boarded and settled in for another six plus hours to return to Gilgit. The weather did seem a little more stable and there did not seem much chance of rain while we headed back up into the upper valleys. Hours passed as the afternoon sun dropped between banks of clouds before being lost for the day behind the mountain peaks that formed the soaring valley walls. We settled and people started to snooze in the comfort of knowing that beds and soft pillows awaited our aching bodies.

The bus’s engine sounded strong as we climbed higher and higher. Our belief that comfort was attainable was dissolved in an instant when we reached a line of three cars at a halt with their drivers sitting on their haunches, close by. We all quickly had to change our mindsets – rather than relaxing, we were back to debris / landslide clean-up. We had been so relieved to think our time on the bus would be relatively short, that nobody had thought that as landslides were coming down lower in the valleys there was a chance that one had come down behind us, higher up the valleys. But the truth of our fallacious thinking sat there in the road, undeniable and ugly.

A quick inspection of the area was not encouraging. The road was gradually rising up a grade and the outer edge of the road was higher than the inner edge. A higher gully had dropped a large amount of rock and mud across the entire width of the road forming a damn. All the water in the original landslide plus the following rain had created a large lake on the upper side of the damn. The lower end of the lake, next to the damn, was between three to four feet deep at its worst point. We had no tools and our bare hands were no match for the damn. So we tried to create some drainage channels along the side of the lake that could drain over the side. The level of the lake seemed to stop rising, but it certainly was not falling noticeably.

After an hour or so of fruitless ideas of how to clear the road, the light was definitely fading and the temperature was falling incredibly quickly. We surrendered back onto the bus to talk through options. Small groups of us sat around talking through various proposals of next steps.

Our discussions were cut short as our guide addressed the bus "I am afraid that our current situation does not look good." He was quite adept with understatement. "It looks like we will have to sleep on the bus tonight. However, I must inform you that we are in dangerous territory as there are many bandits and brigands roaming these hills, especially after dark. As it is now dark, nobody should get off the bus without three other people to keep a look out. Before we settle down let us all try to relieve ourselves close to the bus door."

The ensuing 15 minutes were filled with frustration as multiple people failed to pee, knowing that there were lots of people – some friendly and some not, nearby looking around everywhere. Additionally, I would not have said that the atmosphere was conducive and relaxed.

To say that our nights were filled with hours of sweet, peaceful dreams would have been a stretch and there were no signs of people wishing to relieve themselves, no matter how uncomfortable they felt. Watches have a vindictive nature that was apparent to everyone in the group: there are many more

seconds in each minute than conventionally thought. As for the number of minutes in each hour, the jury is still out. There have been tales of people being tortured by mirages in the blazing desert, but we were fixated on any vestige of first light. It taunted us for hours, but it eventually came. We were all awake and ready to greet it.

As soon as we could, we were back at the damn, sculpting drainage channels with makeshift tools. After an hour or so, the lake was decidedly reduced, but it still posed a significant obstacle. In time, our driver decided to come and take a look himself. He could see that we had made progress and seemed impressed. After looking at the situation for a few minutes, he declared that we had done enough and that he could get the bus through. We all collectively pleaded with our guide to dissuade him from an action that, in our opinions, was at best foolhardy.

Our driver started the bus and gunned it several times to warm the engine. Meanwhile, the group having a bad sense about this endeavor, climbed onto the bus roof to retrieve all of our luggage as the bus could potentially go over the edge and crash into the gorge many hundreds of feet below.

The driver pulled out of the traffic line and backed down the road so that he could build up speed before reaching to damn. He drove up the road like a wild banshee and hit the lower edge of the damn. The front of the bus rose abruptly as the bus successfully flew up to the top of the damn. With the bus's speed, he was going to make it over the damn. The engine compartment and front fender surged down the far side of the damn and into the lake. And that was the end point of the endeavor. As to whether it was the middle of the bus bottoming out on the top of the damn or the weight of all the water still in the lake or both, was of only academic interest. The practical result was the bus's engine was firmly submerged in several feet of muddy water and would not be restarting for a while, if ever again.

While the driver waded his way out of the bus, our group gathered to discuss our next move. Our guide was not certain that that day's bus would leave Gilgit as the previous day's had not arrived from Rawalpindi. Luckily, one other member of our group was, like myself, a long distance athlete. We



volunteered to walk the 20 or so miles that the guide guessed it would take to return to Gilgit. If we had not seen any bus, we would return with some taxis to pick up the party. What could go wrong with this plan?

We gathered emergency gear and supplies before heading up the road, past the traffic that was stuck on the upper side of the lake. Thankfully the new day's weather was settled and warm with a clear blue sky. The surrounding mountains and valleys were laid out in bright and colorful beauty. The walk was spectacular. The road snaked up the valley as we headed towards a far mountain pass.

We rounded a wide sweeping bend in the road as the line of mountains to the right of the valley came to an end. They were replaced by a vast labyrinth of high pastures, wooded hillsides and cascading rivers. But, there, standing solo and magnificent, many miles away, stood the massif of Nanga Parbat. When I found the best vantage point to take a photograph, I pulled out my camera. I had two shots left on my last roll of film. I remember thinking I would regret not using them on our extra day in Gilgit. Here was the reason to have a couple of shots and I still love looking at them – but that spectacular vista remains etched into my memory and nothing can supersede it.

Another hour passed before, in a group of vehicles heading down the valley, we saw that day's bus. Our attempts to stop it only resulted in the driver giving us a strange look and carrying on. We kept walking, until several hours later, the same bus pulled up alongside of us. This time the driver smiled as he opened the doors for us. Our guide had seconded that bus to take us all back to Gilgit with the not so pleased local people who had left Gilgit that morning.

The ride back to town was surprisingly uneventful.. As no planes had made it in for several days, the hotel had our rooms available and cleaned. The remainder of the afternoon was spent relaxing and snoozing. It was amazing how a night in an ancient bus improves the luxurious quotient of just about any bed.

The following morning our much happier and refreshed guide looked optimistic as he announced “The weather is clear again. It should be perfect for flying to Rawalpindi.” There was an audible sigh of relief from us all. Indeed, the flight was spectacular and much easier than taking the bus.

Now, many years later, I look back on that journey and it all seems like a dream. Probably, at times, during the actual events, it felt like a nightmare but there were no long-term bad results, except for the bus, I suspect.

Even with full hindsight, I have no doubt that if I were once again young and just as foolhardy, I would sign up again for that adventure. I am not sure why these types of adventures have appealed to me. I suspect my mother may have wished I had not been this way or been thankful that I never shared all the details with her. But, more importantly, now I know that my wife and daughter are happy knowing that I no longer follow that wayward star, and I am very content sharing family time and more conventional travel with them both.