

Chapter 12

Funky, colourful, original, stupendo



10 days later.

When the hostess announces over the intercom, ‘The plane will be landing in 5 minutes Insh’allah,’ Drew and I squeeze hands that little bit tighter.

‘We’re really close to those mountains,’ I have a very, very . . . very bad feeling about this one.

‘We’re diving pretty fast,’ Drew is trying to be calm. Our Fokker Friendship is being tossed around like a Turkish buffet salad and we are freaked! Even the Pak passengers are issuing grief. Hell, the whole plane is telepathing Allah. The winds are at play with the tiny craft and the pilot is hugging the mountain ranges for protection.

‘Can you see the runway?’

‘He doesn’t seem in control.’

‘It keeps swaying from side to side.’

Time slips surreal. Is our number up?

Not on this occasion, a short while later we’re in the airport car park getting hassled by touts for our rupees, yet feeling someways on safe ground. Later on we learn that the ‘Fokker Friendship’ is one of the most dependable aircraft in the world, they can glide with both engines off. It did mollify a few nerves, however in the Hindukush Mountains there are few level areas to muster a crash landing.

We’re in Chitral, 1,500 metres upside. Escaping the heat of downside Islamabad. Only just back from Australia and already on the road again. Chitral is located in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan.

We’re lodging at the Pamir Riverside Inn and our backyard porch is metres from the Kunar river. Drew is asleep and I’m soaking up the cosmos. Its tranquil themes suggest the day ahead looks good, unlike this morning’s proceedings. The garden is lush and the sheer mountain range is radiating another superb Pakistan backdrop. Delightful. Let’s drink to the tang of New: New people, New ethos, New laughter.

In Chitral all foreigners have to visit the Registration & Permits Office of the Chitral Police. At the Permit office it takes a cramped room containing six bearded gentlemen, all wearing the same coloured light brown shalwar kameez, one hour to register us. And to our vexation – when we first enter the room – about a minute before they acknowledge our presence.

‘Are you *all* working here? Drew says cheekily.

‘Yes. Yes indeed. We need to see your passports and please sign the book with your details,’ says the supervisor. ‘Are you here for tourism?’

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‘Yes, we’re going to Shandur.’

‘Oh wonderful, wonderful,’ replies the supervisor, who’s mood had quickly changed.

‘Be careful of Al Qaeda,’ another buoyantly smirks.

‘Really?’ I play along, yet wonder.

Laughter all round, then the heavily bearded Pathan supervisor bursts into song. Drew and I beam as well. I start to clap in-time, then shout out, ‘Nusrat Fatah Ali Khan.’

More cackles. Then another civil servant says, ‘After after.’ Spinning his hand. Nusrat’s supplanter, gotta have a shot of that. A unique atmosphere. Photo taken and they want a copy too. A tray of chai is brought in, but the green tea is too hot to drink straight away. Nusrat’s supplanter asks us about Belgium and Australia, and tells us we’ll enjoy Shandur Pass and Kalash Valleys. Whilst you can hardly move in the tiny room, Drew and I manage to fill in the heavy registration book that was probably made 80 years ago. We are officially the 201st and 202nd foreign visitors since 1 January 2003. Before 9/11 the average visitation was 4,500 per year. Enough said.

Chai is sipped and we thank the bearded ones for their generosity, get the address for the photo and it’s Allah affez.

Chitral ‘proper’ is the capital of Chitral District, and contrary to Islamabad there’s a real absence of women on the streets. Whilst walking around town we observe only three females, and they are dressed in *burqas* (the tent-like piece of clothing that covers the body from head to toe). Whilst we gain plenty of attention, the curious locals are a gregarious well behaved bunch. We purchase a number of indigenous handicrafts and procure tapes of local Chitrali music. True to form it had all been recorded live, no studio effort. Traditional song, taped on a portable cassette-deck in someone’s bedroom or backyard patio. Primal stuff: soul,

alcohol and drugged-out splendour.

Next stop Kalash Valley. Then the polo at Shandur Pass.

‘How much will it cost?’ I ask.

‘2,500 rupees,’ the driver replies.

‘Can we have a discount?’ Drew chips in.

The prospective driver with his buddies listening in are all smiles. The driver ponders for a moment. ‘2,300 is a fair price.’

‘Please, a little more discount. 1,800,’ offers Drew.

‘Teekay. 2,200 is my last price.’ The driver is still in good humour, but realises a bargaining duel is on hand. Drew and I glimpse one another, exchange perception analysis and as she smiles Drew pulls out her secret weapon,

‘*Maeri jip tandhi hey,*’ my pocket is cold. At this, the whole gang of men burst into laughter. What is the hapless chap to do? He has been out-manoeuvred and has to lower his price.

‘Ok 2,000,’ with a Paki-wag and a handshake, the deal is done. He knows it is a buyers market.

‘Tis a two hour jeep ride to Bumboret Valley, one of the three valleys that make up the Kalash area. We are keen to get started as we’ve heard great things about the Kalasha. Surrounded by the Hindu Kush Mountains, the Kalasha people are a non-muslim tribe numbering around three thousand. They have their own religion, language and dress.

‘Cello,’ declares Drew to the driver.

We decide to sleep in Bumboret as it reputedly has the most-to-see. Hotel sorted we go exploring. ‘Hello, Hello.’ A group of women working in the field beckon us over: Kalash women appear in public, quite unlike the rest of NWFP. They are dressed in full costume and appear glad to see us. A man comes out of his mud-brick hut, clean

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shaven, trimmed moustache, cream coloured *pakol* and beige shalwar kameez. He speaks a little English. I notice Drew taking a few snaps of the women. It's sometimes awkward in these situations, however this time the girls don't seem to mind; they appear genuine, so we go with it. One attractive lady is holding a newborn. She is so young I can't help myself.

'How old is that lady?' I ask the Kalash man.

'She is sixteen Sir.'

'Is it her baby?'

'Ji Sir.'

'That's quite young.'

'She was married at fifteen Sir.'

'TK . . . And who is that man laying over there?' I point to the old gent lying on a bed outdoors in the shade. 'Is he sick?'

'No Sir. He is just resting.'

I walk over for a peek. Yes, the man is resting, a strange looking soul. He has a tiny little body, a bald elfy head, a stringy white beard and thick tattooed eyeliner. When I look into his eyes, I know I've met a saint.

'This man is 120 years old.'

'120,' I reply. 'Really?'

'Some people live long in this valley.'

I hold the venerable one's hand and wish him well. Is he really 120? He sure looks elderly. What is his secret?

Drew observes the women's garb, 'Funky, colourful, *original stupendo!*' Massive orange and red beaded necklaces, tastefully embroidered long black robes. Lengthy platted hair; one emanating from the mid forehead. Weird intricate tattoos on their faces, and the icing on the crab are the magnificently abstract head-pieces laced with cowrie shells (the cowrie was once a small unit of currency in

Northern India). The men used to have their own costume, but have now copped-out, and they wear the shalwar kameez. Due to their physical traits: fair complexion, blue/green eyes, blonde hair, some say the Kalash are descendants from the troops of Alexander the Great who marched his men across the Hindu Kush in 327BC. (Whatever the case, the two days Drew and I spend here are sparkling.)

A brief time later we bid goodbye and continue our walk around this enchanting valley, where we meet Subhan, a student studying in Peshawar. He speaks excellent English and is home for the summer holidays. He invites us into his mud-brick abode where we drink tea with his brother Miangul and Miangul's wife. Miangul's wife doesn't speak English, ergo we communicate with a few astute words of Kalash that we pluck from our guide book. 'Ah mutrim,' I have to pee, I say. They cover us with gracious hospitality and quirky Kalash trivia, e.g. all the people of the Kalash tribe have the same last name, which is Kalash. And birth and menstruation are considered unclean, so the women go to a *bashali*, a hut by the river for the term. Furthermore, newborns are breastfed for a whole 2 years -- the elixir of life.

The thing that sits peculiar with us though is the dirt and grime in the houses, and that which is heavily caked on the women and children. It doesn't sit parallel. The men are pristine in comparison. How is it, that their valleys are lush, their manners enchanting, the colourful high priestess clothing dazzling to the eye, yet, women are holding babies with limbs and faces putrid from the earth. It doesn't befit. It looks like they haven't washed in weeks. What gives? There is a clear flowing river, running through the centre of town. Why don't they use it more often? Are they still a

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primitive society, with seemingly limited assimilation of the outer world? Analysis resolution: it merely adds to the charm.

We stroll down the valley and back to our hotel for lunch where we pig-out on hot chips, washed down with tomato sauce and Fanta. Yummo! We're lodging at the Kalasha Continental, a basic hotel run by Kalash people.

'I've got local feet,' Drew utters, looking down at her putrid thong clad flesh.

'Yes Drew . . . Drew, you're so fucked-up,' witty & bitchy was she.

Later whilst relaxing in our hotel room, Drew imparts another jewel. I'm on the bed reading Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance and she is playing gameboy.

'It's thick toilet paper isn't it?'

'Huh . . . yes Drew, it is. Hardee Ha Ha! You're fucking incredible. The Queen of Poo.'

Next morning there are still more intellectual interludes. 'It's amazing how many toilet flush systems there are in the world.' I have a cephalic-zing whilst in the bathroom, 'You'd think there'd just be maybe five or six. But no, there's hundreds.'

'Did you poo?' replies Drew.

At breakfast Drew was still in fine form. She becomes a bit miffed when they only serve up one egg each. Hardly enough for a verve kick-start. Yet amends are quickly made as the locals get nervous observing the Drew-flapping-arms-routine. *Don't mess with Drew and her googs*, a wise man once said. *When the menu says Eggz . . .*

Later, we amble to the village, to purchase an original headpiece we'd spotted yesterday. Our prize is waiting for us at an amazing 300 year old wooden dwelling. The Kalash man of about 40 years has no beard, short mousy blonde

hair and crystal blue eyes. He could easily pass as an Italian movie star if it wasn't for his shalwar K. He decides to provide us with a quick tour of his home. The kitchen is fascinating. It seems like nothing has changed in all these years: the cooking is still done on an open hearth; weird utensils are laying all around and dried-out goats-bladder containers hang primal from the ceiling. Moreover, he has mulberry wine bubbling away on his bootlegging still. A most wonderful looking construction, with different coloured tubes running everywhere: from a black sooted bucket, to several rust coated tin cans, then on to an exceedingly murky, recycled, 5 litre oil container, with a small fire stimulating the whole process. I get out my camera. Seeing our interest, the movie star offers us a cupful of his brew. A severe taste and potent at 50% alcohol.

Aesthetic viewing habitation complete, we then bargain for the skilfully crafted headgear. The man says it took four months to structure each piece, but seems pleased with our final offer. We've knocked him down 200 rupees. We pay him, thank him, finish the mountain firewater and leave. We bump into Subhan down the way and he offers to show us the cemetery. More strangeness! All the wooden coffins are fractured: no lids, completely open to the elements. Skulls and other bones lay prostrate, scattered eerily, hither and tither.

'FWOOF! This cemetery's insane,' I proffer loud.

'The Kalash used to lay their dead to rest in coffins, but above ground. And many years ago there was a flood and the whole cemetery was ruined,' Subhan puts us in the picture. The remains are now all jumbled together, consequently they can't tell whose bones pertain to what casket. Nowadays the Kalash bury their dead underground.

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We find our short time in the valley engrossing and tell Subhan we'll return for one of their festivals (which are famed for music and especially their dancing), possibly even the huge Christmas bash which sees all Muslims banned due to the religious timbre. Non-Muslim foreigners can attend, but any male ring-ins must pay for a goat at oblation time and experience the sacrificial one's blood splashed to his noggin. I'm there.

kalash me here
kalash me there
kalash me overall