Himalaya

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Introduction

I've always had a soft spot for my *Penguin Encyclopaedia of Places*. On a dull day when I should be talking to someone about tax returns I like to open it at random and set off a few quiet fantasies. Initial disappointment that you've opened it at Norwich and Nottingham can turn quickly to a frisson of excitement as, lower down the page, your eye alights on Noumea, Nova Lisboa and Novara, all places I'd leave for tomorrow if someone said I had to.

At the end of 2002, with *Sahara* still warm, as it were, Roger Mills came up with the idea of following it with a series on the Silk Route. When I looked at the map I saw an awful lot of desert along the way, and I was looking for something that would take me away from desert sands for a while. I was about to close the atlas regretfully when my eye drifted south and east to where the Silk Route becomes entangled with that long, white-tipped mass of mountains, hanging like a raised eyebrow above India, and connected by the single word: Himalaya.

Something began to tingle. I reached for the *Encyclopaedia of Places* and found the page I was looking for. '*Hillingdon*, Greater London Borough', '*Hinckley*, Urban District in Leicestershire' and there, snugly between the two, '*Himalaya*. In Sanskrit, "Abode Of Snow". Vast mountain system in central Asia lying along the S edge of the Plateau of Tibet, enclosed by the Indus and the Brahmaputra Rivers. It extends generally ESE in an immense curve about 1500 miles long.' There wasn't a word in that brief description that didn't thrill me, and by the time I shut the book I knew what the next two years were going to be about. (No, not Hillingdon in 12 one-hour episodes.)

What the Sahara is to desert, the Himalaya is to mountains. Both share the same contradictory attractions, appealing and appalling, tempting and terrifying in equal, and ultimately irresistible, measure.

By rights I should have followed up *Sahara* with something easier. Perhaps I should have taken more seriously our sound recordist John Pritchard's suggestion of a series called 'Death By Luxury'. But it's the mind as well as the body you have to look after, and that's where the Himalaya seemed to have the edge.

All the elements that appeal to me most about travel were on offer. The stimulus, mental and physical, of working at extremes, the breaking of new ground (I had never been to any of the places on our route), and the chance to go in by the back door, as it were, and see how lives are lived in a fascinatingly mixed bag of countries: superpowers of the future like India and China; countries like Pakistan, recently pushed to the centre of international politics; secretive, unconquered mountain kingdoms like Nepal and Bhutan; and remote lands on the margin of the world's consciousness like Nagaland and Ladakh.

The idea seemed to appeal to my team as instantly as it did to me, and setting aside advancing ages and hopes for quieter lives, we committed to a Himalayan journey at the beginning of 2003.

From the outset problems loomed as large as the mountains themselves. Pakistan was, though I'm glad to say no longer is, the subject of a Foreign Office advisory against all but essential travel. The whole Kashmir region was highly volatile, and the Maoists in Nepal were engaged in an increasingly threatening guerrilla war with the government. The Chinese were highly sensitive about allowing television crews into Tibet, and the Indian government was wary of our safety in Assam.

To their enormous credit, our production team soothed troubled brows successfully and we were able to leave for the Khyber Pass in May 2003.

There were crisis points, including a brush with the Maoists in Nepal, a nasty bout of illness halfway up Annapurna, and the loss, and subsequent recovery, of one of our crew to altitude sickness as we pushed up to Everest Base Camp. There were problems that could have been much worse, like the SARS epidemic in China, snowstorms in Bhutan and strikes in Bangladesh, but we were more or less intact by the time our tired little band emerged triumphant from a circuitous progress through six countries and 3000 miles of Himalaya at the beginning of April 2004.

The schedule was very tight, and I'm aware that these diaries are

stronger on spontaneity than sober reflection.

What I feel we have achieved, none the less, is to put the Himalaya in a human perspective. We found people living at altitudes higher than the highest mountains in Europe; ancient civilizations surviving on arid, wind-scoured plateaux; gorges two and a half miles deep, through which traders have found their way for thousands of years and, everywhere, religion, vibrant and colourful, and thriving in adversity. In short, we found a Himalaya not reticent and forbidding, but permeated by every sort of human activity.

A battleground of immense geological forces that is a centre of human tectonics as well, with sacred and secular, tribal identity and national aspiration, tradition and technology, all pushing up against each other.

The scope of our journey means that this is not a mountaineer's account of the Himalaya, it's a traveller's account. This is Himalaya, not from top to bottom, but from one end to the other; from the Khyber Pass where in a tight knuckle of mountains the great ranges of the Hindu Kush, the Karakoram and the Himalaya are born, to Bangladesh, where the Himalaya, reduced to dust and sand, is swept out into the waters of the Bay of Bengal.

Great journeys tend to bring me out in a rash of over-used superlatives, so all I will say this time is that Himalaya was a wonderfully, magically, brilliant journey, with more gasps of astonishment per square mile than any other in my entire life. And for once, I think I might be right.

Michael Palin, London, June 2004

A word about dates

We began our journey on 12 May 2003 and due to vagaries of the climate, timing of religious festivals and other key events like polo matches and Horse Fairs, returned to the region at various times before our final arrival home on 7 April 2004. We filmed for a total of six months. This account is based on notebooks and tape recordings kept at the time. Apart from missing out some rest days and days at airports, I've presented the journey as a continuous narrative, because that, in effect, is exactly what it was.

Postscript

Since I put these diaries together there have been significant changes in the region, mainly affecting India and Pakistan, and by and large hopeful. Even before the defeat of the BJP in the Indian elections in May 2004 cross-border relations with Pakistan had been improving, and both sides were pledged to a peaceful outcome in Kashmir, the most troubled area we went through. With the advent of India's first non-Hindu Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, this process is expected to continue.

Indians are playing cricket in Pakistan again and the British Foreign Office has lifted its advice against non-essential travel to the country. On 22 May 2004 Pakistan was re-admitted to the Commonwealth after five years, a decision which India supported.

The day after that decision a bomb killed 33 people in Kashmir. Change clearly won't happen overnight, but there is cause for cautious optimism. Less so in Nepal where the Maoists and the monarchy seem unable to sink their differences. There are sinister rumours that Tiger Leaping Gorge in Yunnan might disappear beneath the waters of a reservoir, but better news for Bangladesh's cricket team who have won their first Test Match and a one-day series too.

MP, February 2005

Day One : Up the Khyber

Below the walls of the fort that guards the Khyber Pass there is a viewing platform on which rows of chairs are set out, facing Afghanistan, like circle seats at the theatre. They convey an air of expectation, of something about to happen, of a curtain about to rise on great events.

Casts of thousands have at one time or another filled the plains below, as greedy armies, seeking the great prize of India, gathered at this narrow western gateway. Darius I, King of Persia, led his soldiers through the pass nearly 500 years before the birth of Christ. He was followed, nearly two centuries later, by Alexander the Great. Six hundred years ago I would have seen Tamburlaine's army, down from Samarkand, toiling up the hill towards me, and 400 years after that, the lone, exhausted figure of Army Surgeon Brydon bringing news of the annihilation of 17,000 of his colleagues who had set out to conquer Afghanistan for the British.

Despite the bloody nose of that terrible defeat in 1842, the British returned to Khyber almost 50 years later. Recognizing that the Afghans could not be subdued by war, they sought to keep them in their place by peaceful treaty. Having made a deal with Kabul, they instructed Mortimer Durand to invent a border between Afghanistan and Queen Victoria's India.

To make things easier for everybody Durand marked the borderline with giant numerals engraved on the foothills, and they can still be seen on the Afghan side of the pass. '1', '2', '3', '4'. The limits of the British Empire.

The Durand Line made no sense, then or now, to the Pathans who live on either side of it, nor does it appear to have made much sense to the generations of British squaddies sent to guard it, who accorded this bleak spot a memorable place in Cockney rhyming slang. Khyber Pass, Arse. (Khyber is locally pronounced with a soft 'K', so 'Carry On Up the Khyber' would, with Pashto inflection, become 'Harry On Up the Hyber'.)

But the Pakistan army of today takes the border very seriously,

and they have provided an ambitious plaster model that mirrors the terrain ahead of me: the dark shadows of the mountains, the low brown hills, and the long and winding road that twists and turns between them.

'Such a river of life as nowhere else exists in the world', is how Kipling described the road that crosses the Khyber Pass. It was first laid nearly 500 years ago by the Afghan Emperor Sher Shah Suri to connect the extremes of his territory, Kabul in Afghanistan and Dacca in Bengal. In those days it was said that an unaccompanied woman could travel its 1500-mile (2400 km) length without fear or hindrance.

The British later paved it and christened it the Grand Trunk Road. Abbreviated to the colloquial 'GT Road', it remains to this day one of the most important transport arteries on the subcontinent.

Railways, rather than roads, were the status symbols of Britain's empire, and it was inevitable that there would eventually have to be a railway up to the Khyber. Construction began in the 1920s, amply fulfilling the criteria for a colonial railway, being both expensive and difficult to build.

At the cost of some £100,000 a mile, a line was squeezed for 27 miles through the rocky foothills between Peshawar and the Afghan border, an impressive burrowing job requiring 34 tunnels and 92 bridges and cuttings.

Though the last mile or two is now a spectacular no-man's land of abandoned viaducts and fallen arches, the line from Peshawar to Landi Khotal has been kept open for its tourist value.

Recent business has been badly hit by post 9/11 security scares and, for a while, the British Foreign Office was advising travellers not to come to Pakistan at all, so it's not surprising that Landi Khotal station is quiet as the breeze this morning as I wait for the train, which, I'm reliably informed, is the first to have left Peshawar for three months.

A group of teenage boys is fascinated by our presence. They form a circle around me, curious, unthreatening and very close.

'D'you live round here?' I ask their ringleader.

He replies in English with a toss of the head, confidently, if eccentrically.

'Why not?'

'D'you see many people from England here?'

'From England? Why not?'

I ask him if he's working.

'I have finished school. I have no job. There are no jobs here.'

'Have you brothers and sisters?'

'Why not?'

'How many?'

'We are 30 in our family.'

We're interrupted by a distant wheezing hiss and the whoop of a train whistle and as we turn, there, breasting the incline into the station, is a surreal snapshot of Empire.

Despite the silver-painted crescent moon and star of Islam on their noses, the breathless pair of geriatric locomotives that gasp to a halt beside me were built in Britain, in 1916. They draw two tankers of fuel and two coaches, from which descends a well-behaved group: workers from a bank in Islamabad, an imposing white-haired Welshman who is headmaster of an exclusive private school in Peshawar, prosperous-looking businessmen with cameras and binoculars and their unveiled wives. A band, immaculately turned out in plumed hats, tartan scarves and white gaiters, dismounts from the train. With a flourish of the bandmaster's silver-topped baton, the sound of drum and bagpipe mingles with the sighing of steam engines and the polite chatter of disembarked passengers. Only the presence of black-clad Pathan policemen with rifles spoils the powerful impression of having been transported back to an Edwardian house party.

A short, harassed man, carefully turned out in polo shirt and slacks, seeks me out and introduces himself as Zahoor Durrani, the man whose travel company keeps the Khyber Railway alive. He has organized today's outing. Included in the price of the ticket is a lunch and, there being no facilities of any kind at the station, Zahoor buses us to the Khyber Rifles Officers' Mess, where this normally arid landscape of rock and scree is cloaked with green lawns, rose-beds and ancient maple and walnut trees. A buffet lunch is served from a tent, after which we're entertained by military dancers in local costume. The dance seems a little camp at first, with much tossing of heads and raising of knees, when, quite suddenly, from among scarves and voluminous tunics the dancers produce rifles, which they loose off in time to the music. This, I'm assured, is how they celebrate in the Tribal Areas, and I'm

just relieved that there are no US warplanes within range.

Back aboard the train, we pull out of Landi Khotal as the track cuts through successive outcrops of bare rock, amplifying the shriek of the bogies into ear-splitting howls. Then the walls of a longer gorge begin to close in, and the heat of the day and the stench of the furnace become almost unbearable.

We grind to a halt in one of the tunnels, trapped like bread in a toaster, and are only saved from suffocation at the very last minute, when the cow that was blocking the tunnel is persuaded to move.

The last miles of the journey are less fraught, a slow glide into the wide Vale of Peshawar, with time to indulge the voyeuristic pleasures of railway travel: surreptitious views over high walls into courtyards and back gardens, glimpses of life backstage, where mothers and wives prepare food and hang out the washing, and children carry bundles of wood and bring the cows and goats home. As the train passes it gives a look-at-me whistle. The animals run away from it, the children run towards it, and the women stare with a frank curiosity they'd never allow themselves if their men folk were about.

On the outskirts of Peshawar we pass one of the newest cities in Pakistan, the Kachi Gahi refugee camp, thought to be the largest in the world. It grew up in 1982 to deal with the displacement of Afghans after the Soviet invasion. Because the Afghans are great entrepreneurs, trade has thrived here and almost anything from guns to drugs to washing machines is available in Smuggler's Bazaar, the heart of this warren of sheds and shacks. Since the fall of the Taliban the trickle of overladen trucks returning to Afghanistan has become a flood, yet 1.5 million refugees remain in this camp alone. And this is a fraction of the 18 million displaced people for whom Pakistan is their temporary home.

Zahoor Duranni tells me all this without any emotion, other than some quiet pride that his country has dealt with this enormous burden without complaint.

He gestures down towards the sprawling camp.

'We're all the same people.'