
Travels in Wild Places – Peshawar to Kabul, overland.

Peshawar, North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. Destination: Kabul. It's 7.00am, time for breakfast. As we munch through cornflakes and small, round, wheaty balls, the *chaokidar* comes into the room with a spaniel expression. He speaks a mélange of Urdu and Pashto, and I speak a fusion of Urdu-Dari so we have some difficulty understanding. Teksi, tekxi, he says. Eventually the broad grin of comprehension breaks across my face. He is talking about a taxi.

“No, no” I say, we have booked a taxi. “Shamin's uncle is coming. Thanks for your concern.”

It is Eid, the big festival right after the month of Ramazan. Everyone is celebrating the end of fasting by taking a nationwide holiday, and he is worried that no one will be working. We are strangely confident; and unusually our confidence is rewarded: at 7.30 the taxi is there. We greet Shamin's uncle, he gestures proudly towards his car. It is a tiny Suzuki. I gaze unhappily at this, his small source of pride, sort of a lawnmower with car body on top. This is to carry us to the border.

We squeeze, exhale and fold ourselves in. Before we can breathe in again, Uncle guns the accelerator and the Suzuki breaks into a crawl.

Once moving, Uncle gets right to the point. “It is Eid”, he says. “Happy Eid”, I say. “Yes” he says, “But today no one is working. All people are happy today, visiting, going mosque, not

working. Just me. See how empty the streets are!”

Now I had thought this was due to the early hour, but he continues on. “This day is like Christmas, he says. No one is working. It is Eid! All peoples are having this day as a holiday.” “Yes”, we say.

We drive to the Khyber Agency to pick up our *khassadar*, and my confidence is given another dent. A khassadar is an armed guard, ostensibly to protect us from thieves and mayhem. We need one, but it seems there are none around. “My good man”, the official exclaims, “it is Eid! All the khassadars have gone home! You will come tomorrow! It is no trouble. I will gladly make you a khassadar then. It is *no* trouble!”

I begin explaining that in fact, it is trouble, but we are politely hustled out and packed back into the little yellow Suzuki. Undeterred, our driver sets off towards Takta Beeg, where the khassadars have their lair. We are puzzled, but he is insistent. 40 minutes later, we arrive at a small shack and an open gate. Uncle makes a few inquiries. Happily, it turns out there are khassadars, and yes they will go with us and yes, we may pass, but where is our stamp? “You see, you are Foreigners and None Shall Pass Without A Khassadar And A Stamp.”

“Stamp?” “Yes, the stamp from the Khyber Agency. You must have one. No, you cannot go through with out one. No, you need it, no, just go back. It is no trouble.”

We go back. The official is not pleased to see us. We are 22 hours early. It is trouble, I can tell, but still I explain and his not-pleaseness grows. He grouchy gives us the stamp and does not call me his good man. Off to Takta Beeg again. By now, the sun is right into the day's business and we are yet to actually leave, but at least now we appear to have all the things which we originally thought we had.

At Takta Beeg there are no khassadars. We pull over and wait and watch as small kids throw firecrackers at us. Eid is lots of fun, it seems. Uncle sighs wistfully. Cars full of Afghans and Pakistanis zoom through the gate, and we look on, enviously. After we have waited the magic amount of time (about 47minutes, it seems), one of the guards, who has until now sat motionless, suddenly becomes a khassadar. He seizes a machine gun, jumps in the front seat and off we go.

The Suzuki has good intentions, but a poor constitution. We labour up the hills preceding the pass and a suddenly loud bang advertises itself from the rear axle. My bottom abruptly commences a jigging sort of vibration. Uncle stoutly ignores all this for a good 20 minutes, until the growing bangs threaten to blow the boot apart. Reluctantly he



The road to Kabul. Well, sort of a road

draws to a halt. All four of us pop out and peer underneath the car, which is so low to the ground, it's like looking under a closed door. Some exploratory bouncing on the car by the khassadar reveals the shock absorber is broken. "The *jumpin*", he says gravely, "it is broken!" It is the only words he speaks the entire journey.

"Jumpin broken!", Uncle exclaims. "Very expensive to buy a new jumpin. At least 900 rupees". He looks thoughtfully at us. "Today is Eid, too. No one working today. Just me, for you". We nod, sagely and get back in the car. Gamely trying to save the jumpin, we all sit on the right-hand side of the car, which is now listing dangerously, like a small boat in a strong wind.

The bangs, thumps and exhortations of "Eid! Eid! Jumpin broken!" continue as we limp the last 30 km to Torkham. We pay Uncle and the look of frank disgust that his face assumes surprises even the khassadar. It is as though we had just handed him a fresh turd.

"Is that all?" He can hardly speak. "It's Eid! My jumpin is broken. No one is working!"

"You already told us", I reply somewhat testily, and give him an extra 50 rupees and a packet of sweets. "Now this, Uncle, is a very good sum."

Uncle doesn't think so.

Unexpectedly, the khassadar takes our side, and marches us off to the other side of the border, leaving Uncle, the Suzuki and the jumpin in Pakistan. A few more stamps in

our passport, and we are back in Afghanistan. It is only 11.00am.

The Khyber Pass re-echoes to the sound of artillery shells, as Afghans celebrate Eid in the national style. We find transport to Kabul without much trouble – a Russian saloon that looks and drives like it is ex-KGB. Two burly Afghans, direct descendants of someone very large, pack into the front, and we are off. Our driver is strangely silent on the whole Eid subject. In fact, he is silent on everything, pausing only to light cigarettes and liberally curse other drivers.

Now that we have enough room to rotate our necks, we begin to appreciate the passing

scenery. It is magnificent. The mountains, dusty chocolate colour fold down around us until we are out of the valley. Irrigation canals are filled with clear water and the fruit trees and eucalypts sway in the sunlight. Slowly the road begins to rise again, and we approach Jalalabad. The hills rise, like a crumpled blanket and a river swings in to flow alongside us. At Jalalabad we stop to buy fruit and biscuits. The roadside stall is aflame with the colour of mandarins, apples, pomegranates and custard fruit. The shopkeeper, white-haired and gummy, swings into action and measures out a *pao* of mandarins and one of apples. "Happy Eid", we say, and he looks delighted.

After Jalalabad, the road, already degenerate, threatens to mutiny. A few miles on, and it does, breaking down into a state of utter anarchy and lawlessness. Huge potholes and mounds defy us to traverse them. It is like driving through a building site, except we are going to do it for eight hours. The driver is unfazed, leading me to speculate that he is either drugged or nerveless. Summoning a few snatches of words from where I am flung and tossed in the recesses of the back seat, I ask, "Does the road improve?" Happily he is capable of speech: "No", he says.

At times, we actually leave the road and drive beside it. I am unsure if this is any better, but we are passive and inarticulate, helpless passengers on a day-long show-ride.

Finally, alongside a ruined bridge we stop, and the driver takes a leak. Our co-travellers light cigarettes and look nonchalant, while Julie and I check to make sure we still have the majority of our body parts. Reassembling outside the car, we look around. It is still beautiful. The river, fed by the fierce and snowy Paghman mountains, is running swiftly beside us. Blue, clear and cold. The landscape stretches out ahead, not a car on the road. It is, after all, Eid. In the distance, some kids are splashing in the water and it looks like some women are dancing.

"*Ena. Burem*". Let's go. Our driver is back, we are off. Down the river bank, across the stony trickle, up the other bank and rejoin the road on the other side of the bridge. I am told this road was once all bitumen, you could run down to Torkham for a new visa and be back eating kebobs in Kabul for lunch. It seems laughable now. How has this happened? Just what is going on? The Great Game, which is so blithely and easily talked about in political circles and tutorial rooms at university, often sounds romantic, even noble. Here, 100 miles out of Kabul, that all evaporates. The Great Game was violent and brutal and merciless and the men in suits who decide these things are never the ones who suffer.

The road pushes on and we push on. Ahead, the sun is slowly growing red and the air is cooling. Sadly for us, the road is climbing and the car is complaining. Somewhere in the mountains which ring Kabul, the old saloon runs out of puff. We roll backwards and for a ridiculous moment, I think we will roll in the river, a undignified end to such a journey. We do roll into the river. No, no, sorry, that was Bangladesh, a few months earlier. We don't roll in the river, we stop and with a crowbar and an effluent of swearing, the bonnet is lifted. Borrowing my bright and shiny pocketknife, the driver conducts open engine surgery, and restarts the engine. I lean optimistically forward. Nothing happens. Julie, much more pragmatic than me, has gone to sleep on the back seat. The driver recommences and I wander off amongst the stones that rim the river. It is quiet, cool and picturesque. Snow has drifted down the pass and the river is fast, but eddying in such a peaceable way as to invite a swim. I kneel down, dip my hands in the water and rinse my face. It is invigorating. Something else is invigorating: a curious smell. I have planted my knee beside a great turd. Sensing something awry, I spy a great mass of them. I don't know the collective noun for turds, but now is the time for using it. I am strolling in the local latrine.

I hasten back to the car, which is now going. The driver hands me a dull and blackened

pocket knife, which I recognise as something I once owned, and we resume our travel. It is but a short 2 hours till we reach Kabul. Kabul's outlying areas are unmistakable – the burnt out tanks, the military posts, the destroyed buildings. Yep, we are home. The driver lets out the front passengers in De Afghan, and we continue through to Karte Se, along the black streets, kerosene lamps shining in the shells of houses. This is a grim city and in winter it is even more so. Julie and I sigh: glad to be home, but cognizant that tomorrow, we will again face the starving refugees, forced from the Shomali Valley, the cold, the begging, the violence in the streets. But that is tomorrow. Our driver swings into our street and stops.

“Ena”, he says. We're here. We pay him the agreed amount, his countenance recalls Shamin's Uncle. “Uh, uh” he says, “12,000,000 Afs. Not 11,000,000”. We protest, but he cuts us short with the authority of one who knows: “It is Eid”, he says.