

The Karakoram Highway 1989

By Charles Davis

April 2017

(Continuation of 1989 Silk Road story. [The Road to Kashgar story is here](#))

While we took in the sights of Kashgar, Steve had been busy finding us onward bus tickets. This would be no ordinary bus ride. We were heading onto the Karakoram Highway, over the Khunjerab pass into Pakistan. Although completed in 1978, the road was considered hazardous and had only been opened to foreign travellers in the mid-1980s. We travelled on a public bus; the other passengers were mainly older Hajjis, heading for Mecca.

The first part of the trip went well, at measured pace; the bus stopped from time to time for the hajjis to get out and pray. As we rose in elevation and finally got above the dust clouds, we saw sand dunes with snow, and then grand mountains including Kongur Shan (7,719m). The terrain was diabolically barren, yet there were people to be seen out on the plain.



Mountain desert family and Muztagh Ata (7,509m).

We spent the night in Tashkurgan, a small place, effectively the 'last town in China'. We chatted with a handful of Western travellers at the little restaurant there; the menu was largely mutton and noodles. The diet in this region had been rather monotonous, and there were mumblings of "Post Noodle Depression".

From Tashkurgan, the road turned south, with conditions ahead unknown. There was a confluence of national borders; we passed within 10 kilometres of the Soviet border (now Tajikistan), then a road peeled off to the right, to Afghanistan, only 40 km away. Gradually gaining elevation, we reached a major obstacle – the Chinese border post, 4,000 metres up, but still well short of the Pakistan border. Five hours were wasted while we tried to be polite to grumpy and bureaucratic

border officials (Han Chinese, on what must have been an unwelcome posting); the time included their very extended lunch break, and an hour dealing with a hapless Hong Konger, in another small group, who did not have the correct visa. She faced a 9,000 kilometre round trip to Beijing to get one; tears were shed.

Eventually, through the fog of the language barrier, it became clear: the Khunjerab Pass was closed due to bad weather. With nothing much happening while unintelligible debate continued at the border post, a few of us fitter folk decided to go for a walk, to check out a yurt on the hillside above, about a kilometre away. We encountered a family, dressed for warmth, puzzled but welcoming, keeping an eye on a healthy herd of long-haired goats. They were Tajik people, it would seem; at least, they nodded furiously when we asked "Tajik?" They were nomads who still wandered across Central Asian borders at will, seeking feed for the animals.



They proudly showed us inside the yurt, and it was clear to me that I was being made welcome, in best Muslim nomad tradition, to stay the night. I declined, not knowing exactly what our bus would be doing, and I still regret not taking the opportunity.



Instead I stayed with the bus, which took us back to Tashkurgan, where we cooled our heels for two more days waiting for the weather on the pass to clear. Dull days were brightened by the beautiful scenery, and the occasional camel train (the Bactrian variety, two humps) rolling into town, carrying trading goods from who knows where. A section of unpaved path on the edge of town was, a guidebook told us, part of the original Silk Road, so I made a point of walking it.



Bactrian camel train in Tashkurgan

The hotel had nice warm beds but no heating. With bare concrete floors, getting out of bed was an instant wakeup in the freezing mornings. Breakfast was unforgettable if unappetising: stale peanuts, a radish, and Tibetan tea laced with pink yak butter.

After all that inactivity, the bus suddenly stirred to life, onward and upward. This time we passed through the border control quickly, climbing into ever wilder country. One final miserable military checkpoint and we were into wilderness. The bus chugged slowly to the Khunjerab Pass, the highest paved road in the world at the time (4,700 metres). I had hoped we could stop for photos at the top, but the weather was turning ominous, and some of the older hajjis were distressed by the thin air. As we passed into Pakistan, the weather closed in, snow falling heavily, and we descended into cloud and virtual whiteout. We could see nothing outside the bus apart from roadside markers, with unfathomed precipices beyond.

We eventually emerged from the freezing fog and could now see the tortured terrain all around. Knuckles remained white as we contemplated the sheer drops off the edge of the narrow road. There was plenty of time for said contemplation as the bus descended, in low 'crawler' gear, to the tiny Pakistan border outpost of Sust, where we transferred to local minibuses for the continued descent through the Hunza region.

Down in the valley, it still wasn't all plain sailing. I made note of landslides, mudslides, washaways, damaged bridges, sand, massive boulders fallen on the road, and waterfalls. We were stopped at a checkpoint and warned about bandits on the road ahead; the soldiers even escorted us at one stage. The road in places was incised into sheer cliffs.



Eventually we were brought to a halt: an avalanche had completely blocked the road. We were told that there were two similar avalanches, about 10km apart. It was our good fortune that another minibus had been caught between the two; although it was trapped, after a fashion, it was able to ferry us between, after much negotiation, and for a premium fare! All we had to do was haul our bags over the snow at either end.



Thanks to all the delays in China, we could not stop anywhere for long. Flights to catch, jobs to return to! There was, however, a pleasant night in the 'Shangri La' town of Gulmit, where some perfect morning weather afforded us a magnificent view of the Hunza valley.



Throughout the trip, we had been effectively cut off from news of the outside world. No Internet or mobile phones in 1989. So it was a real surprise to hear, after we had departed China, that Beijing and other centres were being convulsed by protest. The Tiananmen Square massacre took place only days after we left China, with much of the dirty work carried out by soldiers imported from Xinjiang, the region we had passed through.

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