

# On Top Of The World

After we cross the Karakoram Highway and survive the NWFP in Pakistan, we climb the highest roads in the world from disputed Kashmir to Ladakh, the so-called 'Indian Tibet'.

Words by Akis Temperidis Photos by Vula Netu and Akis Temperidis



Ladakhi woman on the high-altitude road to Leh.



Snake charmer in Ladakh, India.



**T**here are two borders worldwide where you smile in front of a webcam to get your passport stamped: the USA and Pakistan. Apart from this bureaucratic procedure, there is no other similarity between the two countries. When you enter Pakistan, you enter the third world of Islam. Villages are dusty. Sewage systems are open. Roads are dominated by dazzlingly painted, overloaded old Bedford trucks. Men have long beards and they all wear loose 'shalwar kameez' combined with 'cafsons'—rounded woollen hats. You will likely see no one on the roads from Quetta all the way to Islamabad, an endless trip of 2,000km through the notorious Bolan Pass and the hot state of Sindh. This was a route we had to follow in order to get to India and, believe me, it wasn't an easy choice given the notoriety of the place.

Balochistan is a major opium route and we were warned by the Greek embassy in Tehran to skip it because of several kidnappings that occurred there during the last year. At the first police control, towards Quetta, we were asked two things by the black-uniformed policeman: one was if we needed a police escort. The second was if we could take a picture of him. We said "No, thanks," to the optional escort service and we responded happily to the request for a photo. The officer was delighted to see his face on the camera's screen. That moment, we learned two basic things about Pakistan: that policemen are super-friendly; and that you, the traveller, are considered a celebrity here. Which means things can get either very good or very nasty.

Quetta was like a war zone, six months after the clashes that followed the murder of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007. After one night and a great walk in the busy market, we decided to hit the road to the north. We were warned again by locals: "Don't think about travelling next to the border of Afghanistan. You better follow theez rod!"

'Theez' meant a huge loop through the Bolan Pass, a route suitable more for a trip to Karachi, at the south end of the country, than to Islamabad, which is to the north. We obeyed, of course. When we entered Bolan Pass, we were stopped by police again. This time, we were obliged to wait for an escort team. Up to Jacobabad, we were accompanied by fully armed



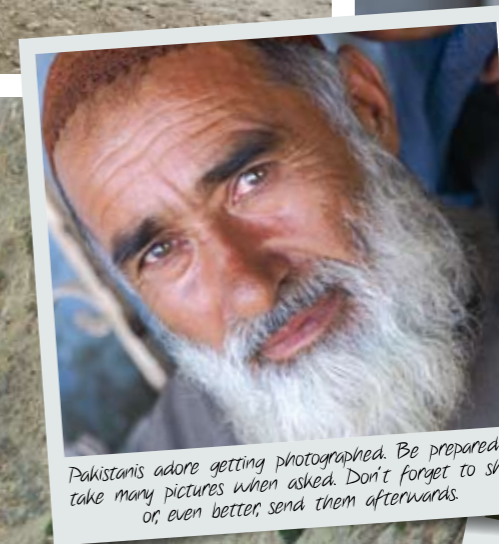
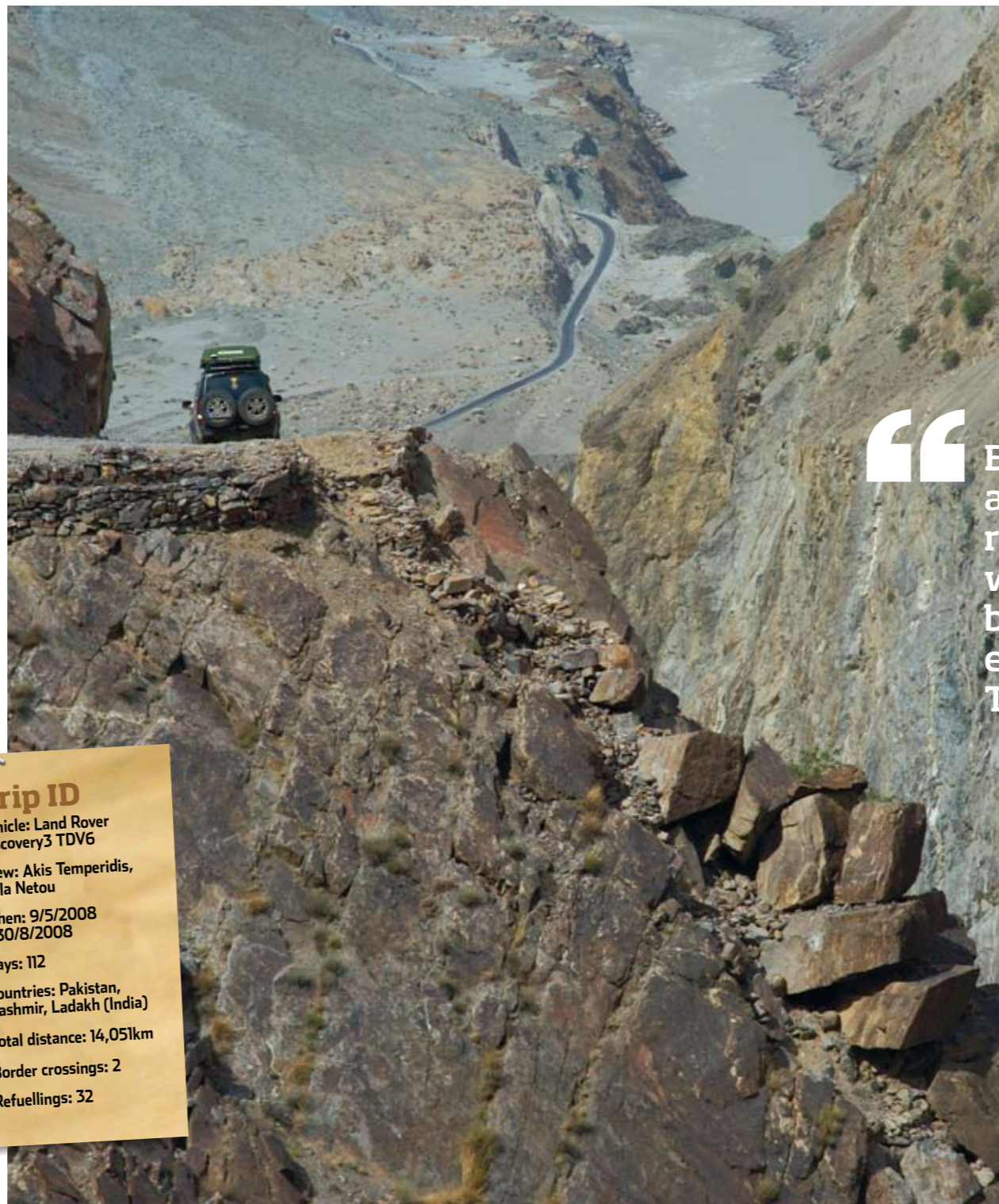
Going shopping with armed police escorts in Jacobabad.



May I have an espresso please?



Men holding hands on the road is a common gesture in the Muslim world. This is by no means homosexual behavior.



Pakistanis adore getting photographed. Be prepared to take many pictures when asked. Don't forget to show or, even better, send them afterwards.



It is a privilege to have your breakfast in the Himalayas. Nanga Parbat is the ninth-highest peak (8,126m) in the world.

“Balochistan is a major opium route so we were warned by the Greek embassy in Tehran to skip it.”

Vula dressed as Kalasha. This tribe—considered to be descendants of Alexander the Great's army—kept their habits and polytheistic religion hidden for centuries in the valleys of the Hindu Kush, the core of fundamentalist Islam.



Classic Pakistani truck!

**Trip ID**  
 Vehicle: Land Rover Discovery3 TDV6  
 Crew: Akis Temperidis, Vula Netou  
 When: 9/5/2008 - 30/8/2008  
 Days: 112  
 Countries: Pakistan, Kashmir, Ladakh (India)  
 Total distance: 14,051km  
 Border crossings: 2  
 Refuellings: 32





*Hunza are the only approachable women in Pakistan.*

policemen loaded on pick-up trucks and Chinese motorbikes. Every time we changed district, we had to wait for the next team to arrive; if we kept going, we obliged them to make a U-turn to get in front of us. They seemed delighted to protect a fancy Land Rover carrying two crazy Greeks.

In Jacobabad, they took us to a hotel for the night. "We don't want to pay for a hotel," we said. "Whear doo yoo wont to slip, Sir?"

"At the police station," I replied.

Lesson no. 3: if you don't find a bed or a camp in Pakistan, ask for accommodation in a police station. It is the safest place to camp, unless an Al Qaeda suicide bomber decides to visit it.

That was an unforgettable night. We had three policemen for company all night. They bought us kebabs, sweets, cokes and a traditional scarf for Vula. I was even offered a hashish joint by the big guy. I did not accept, considering it a bluff or a test but the chief officer lit the handmade cigarette and smoked it passionately. I couldn't believe my eyes! The same night, we camped in the backyard of the police station, which had been heavily shot up during the previous year's clashes. From our roof tent, I could see a bunch of prisoners watching us through the bars. That night we realised that you can do the craziest things in Pakistan. You're a celebrity, right?

**At an altitude of 4,693m, the Khunjerab Pass is the highest paved border crossing in the world.**

### The Silk Road

Islamabad was calm the days we took a rest at the only camp site right on the G6 sector, next to the busy Ampara market. "Businesses are getting better as we've had no bomb



Indian soldiers delighted by the Discovery3. India and Pakistan are still in a state of war over Kashmir.

attacks lately," we were told by Ali, the gentle owner of an internet café. From the capital we hit the road to the north, and what a road! The Karakoram Highway, a narrow road through the Indus Valley to Khunjerab Pass and from there to Kashgar, China. Karakoram was inaugurated in 1982 and is a miracle of road construction, as it crosses one of the harshest geographies in the world. It is a modern version of the route followed by Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan towards India and by Marco Polo on his way to China. Karakoram was the trickiest part of the Silk Road and is still an unforgettable adventure for any traveller attempting to cross it.

The first part is annoyingly slow thanks to heavy traffic, mostly trucks. After 300km, the narrow, twisty road follows the Indus River, and at some points you drive through massive rock formations sculpted by the river. Karakoram passes next to Nanga Parbat, the westernmost peak of the Himalayas. There is a notorious private road leading to a tiny village, standing like an aerie under the snow-capped mountain. We bribed a local guy and risked the integrity of our Discovery3 to drive up, as only a handful of local jeeps are allowed to climb there. Our Disco was allegedly the only foreign car to ever arrive there! We survived the nerve-wrecking path but at some places we had to fill the road with stones so that the heavy, wide Land Rover could fit. It took us three hours to cover 15km!

It was worth the risk plus the two hours of trekking. The same night we slept in a basic hut, under the shadow of the 'killer mountain'. The next day we arrived at Gilgit, the commercial hub of the Karakoram. We took a break and then drove further north, towards Sost, the last town in Pakistan



“Karakoram was the trickiest part of the Silk Road and is still an unforgettable adventure”



### Horn please!

Indian traffic conditions are nerve-wracking and dangerous, like no other country in the world. Be prepared for the worse if you ever dare to drive there. Rule no. 1 is use your horn everywhere, anytime and for any reason!

1. Driving is incredibly slow—average speed is about 35 km/h.
2. Indians seem to be blind on the road. They drive or walk by ear. Hit the horn all the time, otherwise pedestrians, motorbikes and cars will always be an obstacle for you.
3. Watch out for cows. Most of them lie in the middle of the road. Be patient with them, they don't care how long you blast your horn.
4. Use your horn before you overtake, or nobody will move left.
5. Don't get stressed if ten cars honk their horns behind you. It's not personal, it's just how they do things.
6. Don't try to be polite and let others pass first at intersections. Nobody will reward your kindness and let you in.
7. Expect the worst every moment. Many people overtake on blind curves. Many drive in the opposite direction on four-lane motorways.
8. Don't get upset at what you see on the road and don't try to teach the locals the 'right' way of doing things. Remember that there are more than one billion of them.
9. At night, use your high beams. Everybody else does.
10. Last but not least: don't even think of driving a car in India. Take a train instead.



*A shikara drifts peacefully along the canals of Dal lake at Srinagar, a heaven turned into a war zone by the fight for Kashmir.*



*Privacy is an unknown word in India.*

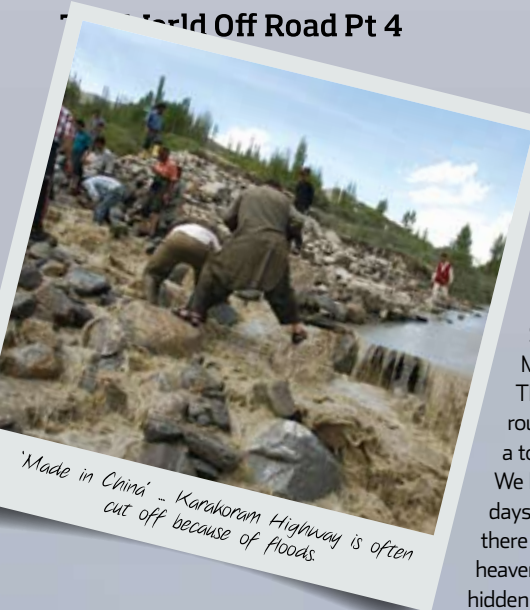
before the border with China. At Karimabad, we met the Hunza people, the subtle, well-educated Ismaili Muslims who lived in a separate kingdom until 1972. It was a heavenly world without traffic until 1982, when the Karakoram arrived there. At Gulmit, the road was cut off by a melted glacier. "It happens," a local told us when we were frustrated that we could go no further. "It's a Chinese construction, that's why," we replied, pointing to a group of Chinese overseeing the road repairs. We waited a whole day while volunteers filled the huge gap with rocks so that we could pass. The next day, we arrived at Sost, passing through breathtaking landscapes like the knife-edged Passu Sar mountains and the Batura Glacier. 80km north is Khunjerab Pass, a hostile, otherworldly place, where only yaks and golden squirrels survive. For us, it was a benchmark to be there, right on the border with China. We were in the most hostile pass of the Silk Road but couldn't enter China as we didn't have the costly documents needed to drive a foreign car in the country. A \$10,000 to enter China for one month? No way! We considered our options at that red-flagged border station, protected by two Chinese guards. Had we gone on, we would still be behind bars now. But it would've made quite a story, don't you think?

We didn't want to return to Islamabad using the same route. So to get back to Gilgit, we decided to take the long way around the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) the notorious part of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan. The unofficial country of the Taliban, a region they—the teachers-turned-fighters—still control, despite frequent bombings by American drone planes and blockades by the Pakistani army. This is a no-go zone for any foreigner. We took the risk and drove there for one reason.



**Pakistani traffic!**





*'Made in China' ... Karakoram Highway is often cut off because of floods.*

**The road from Leh to Manali climbs three times over 5000m and is not passable in winter.**

2000m, the valleys are fertile enough to support a population of 4000 'kafiri' (non-believers, for Muslims). Their wooden huts are built next to the river from which their maze crops are irrigated. You walk here and meet beautiful women with blue eyes wearing heavily ornamented dresses. "Ispata, baba!" (Welcome, Sir!) We felt at home here thanks to the Greek Volunteers, an NGO that is putting in a great effort to make life better for the Kalasha, building schools, maternity centres and a great museum. Thanks to this initiative, the Kalasha people still retain their own unique culture, religion and language, despite being surrounded by fundamentalist Muslims.

After the painful drive through the Kalasha valleys, one shock absorber became completely unscrewed and destroyed the upper mount. We had to fix it on the road. We were happy but uneasy to be there, as we still had to cross the wild west of Pakistan. We climbed the 43 hairpins of the mighty Lowari Pass, passed the Taliban-controlled Swat Valley and arrived

We wanted to meet the Kalasha people, the so-called descendants of Alexander the Great. We took a narrow tarmac road following the Gilgit river, climbed a nasty gravel section at 3700m on the Sandour Pass, and descended to Mastuj and from there to Chitral. This was one of the roughest routes we had ever travelled and a tough test for our suspension. We lived with the Kalasha for a few days and seriously considered living there forever. The Kalasha valleys are heaven on earth, a real Shangri-La. Well hidden in the snow-capped mountains of the Hindu Kush, at an altitude of

in Peshawar, a city that has had the most suicide attacks in history. Inshallah, we survived it. It's a medieval society of conservative men and invisible women, covered under full-body burka. Arriving back in Islamabad, we felt we had returned to the modern world. The next day, a suicide bombing at the Danish embassy shocked the capital city. We realised it was time to leave Pakistan. It is an astonishingly diverse country of great history, sophisticated cultures, with generous people and breathtaking landscapes, but still a war zone.

### The road to Indian Tibet

Lahore in Pakistan and Amritsar in India are twin cities. Punjabi people live in both. They were separated in 1947, when India and Pakistan gained their independence from the British, and were divided according to religion. Thousands died in clashes held during the exchange of populations that followed independence. Muslims were driven to the Pakistani side and Hindus and Sikhs to the Indian side. Waga is the only border left open between Pakistan and India, two nuclear powers that are still in a chronic dispute over Kashmir, a country left 'neutral' after 1947 and still occupied and divided under the UN's watch. The daily flag ceremony on the border reflects the chronic dispute between the countries in an absurd but entertaining way. A Monty Python-style show of camaraderie that is a major attraction



*Women dominate Hunza society. The independent and well-educated. Hunza are Ismaili Muslims, a milder form of Islam.*





## The World Off Road Pt 4

for tourists from both countries.

The next route we followed was a risky one, too. After we paid tribute to the majestic golden temple of Amritsar, we took the mountain road to Srinagar, a twisty, traffic-jammed path leading to the valley where the best saffron in the world is cultivated. We drove for hours at an average speed of 30km/h, struggling to survive Indian drivers who do anything to kill you or commit suicide. These people are crazy! Pressing the horn ten times per second, they drive on the wrong side of the road, race each other like overgrown kids or overtake naively on blind curves. It was the first time during our trip I was sure we would have a serious accident.

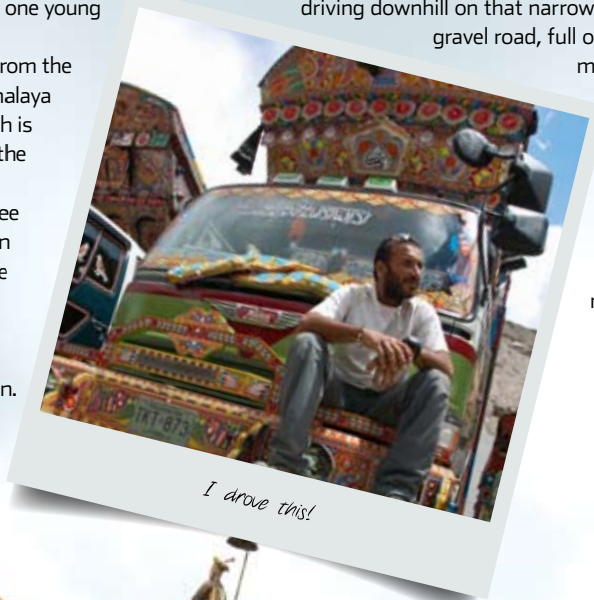
Srinagar is a town devastated by continuous curfews, a heavy military presence and sporadic clashes with autonomist groups or extremists supported by Pakistan. We were lucky enough to be there when everything was calm or seemed to be. Dal Lake and its labyrinth of canals is an idyllic place to relax forever. You can rent a basic houseboat for A\$6 per night (or a palatial one for A\$30) and escape from the honky tonky Indian traffic, strolling all day on a shikara (wooden gondola) and meeting generous Kashmiri people who are not Indian or Pakistani. "We are Kashmiri, we want to be independent and we will never stop fighting for it," one young houseboat owner told me.

Leaving Srinagar, we climbed from the fertile valley at 1600m to the Himalaya range, at 4000m. The road to Leh is a painful, two-day drive through the collision zone between Islam and Buddhism. On the way you can see faces change from dark Caucasian to Chinese. One thing remains the constant all the way: convoys of army trucks carrying troops to high-altitude military bases. The war with Pakistani forces is still on.

We had never seen so many soldiers as on the snow-capped Zoji La Pass, one step from the disputed Line of Control (LOC) between Pakistan and India.

We arrived in Leh, a remote town at 3500m, where the huge valley of the Indus River is like a desert bowl surrounded by Himalayan summits. This is a place you can't drive during winter. It is a well-visited place the rest of the year, full of bloody cheap hostels, busy markets, Buddhist temples (stupas) and alternative yoga or meditation centres. Foreign hippies mix with Buddhist monks. In the north, we attempted a drive on the highest road in the world. We arrived at the Khardung Pass at 5602m after two hours' or so drive. A bit further down the road, there is a dead end—the border with China. The air is so thin up here that the powerful TDV6 engine seemed to have lost half of its cylinders and a bit of black smoke was coming out of the exhaust for the very first time. We felt the altitude sickness more than our car did up there. It was as if we were left with one lung to breath with, and the high blood-pressure provoked awful headaches. Going back to Leh and from there to Manali, the drive was intoxicating as well. We climbed three more times over 5000m and we felt as if we were drunk every time we were driving downhill on that narrow, dilapidated tarmac and gravel road, full of water holes created by the

melted glaciers. In Manali, we went back to India, the real one. We had survived the harshest road trip in the world. Now we were ready to face the heat, the traffic, the noise and smells of the subcontinent. Were we really, though? 🤔



*I drove this!*



Bhaktapur, Nepal, is like a 17th-Century movie set. You can get lost forever here!