

ON YOUR BIKE



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ON YOUR BIKE

By bicycle along the Karakoram Highway

1999





The Beginnings

It began with just an idea of doing something different during our university holidays. Our original plan was to cycle from Lhasa to Kathmandu in June and July - the ideal time to cycle this route. However, the Chinese authorities clamped down on independent travellers due to the fortieth anniversary of their supposed 'liberation' of Tibet. So at the last minute we looked at alternatives that would provide the culture and adventure we desired. Colin had travelled to Mongolia before and had thought it to be a paradise for the cyclist with undulating hills, rolling steppes, forests, rivers and lots of open spaces. It was relatively easy to get to and very culturally diverse. Another option, but by no means our only one, was to cycle the Karakoram Highway (affectionately known as the KKH) from Kashgar in north west China to Islamabad in Pakistan.

Mongolia offered magnificent challenges with trout-filled waterways and a spiritual civilisation that has not changed much since Ghengis Khan roamed the steppes in the twelve century. But to the west lay a different challenge. A challenge of physical and mental ability combined with the flexibility that is needed for exotic travel. A land where the highest road pass was 4,700 metres and the tallest peak, K2, second in height to only one, the magical Qomolangma (Mt Everest). The KKH is part of the fabled 'Silk Road' which has conjured the imagination of many travellers and adventurers for centuries.

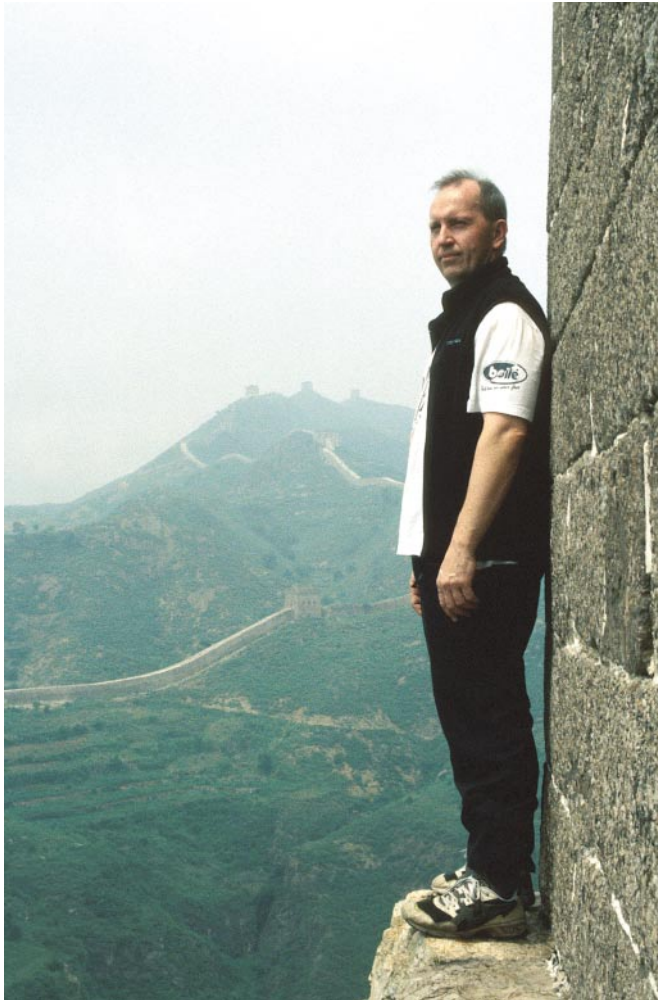
And so we changed our plans and decided upon the KKH. The mystique of the mountains overpowered us once more as one purpose of travelling through Tibet was to cycle to Qomolangma base camp. We knew it wasn't a good time to travel in this region as it would be hot and windy, but we had all taken our annual leave and were committed to this time period.

Colin had driven up the KKH in 1983 as far as Gilgit when he was tour leader and driver on overland expeditions between Kathmandu and London. Ever since he has had desires to re-explore this fabulous country and complete an unfinished journey. Now was his chance.

We didn't really have much time to plan the trip or read about it due to the last minute change and our commitment to university studies coupled with families, work and what social life we could resurrect from our hectic lives. Nevertheless we did it. Colin, being a travel agent specialising in the area, made the necessary flight booking to Beijing, train booking to Urumqi and flight down to Kashgar.

Unfortunately Sean couldn't accompany the group on the departure date as he was committed to late exams, however he arranged to join the others in the western Chinese city of Urumqi. Working in the travel industry has its advantages and Colin was able to book the exit seats for us through his contact at Thai Airways. It's one thing booking these seats and another actually getting them. But the Gods were with us and upon checking in at Melbourne airport we were issued these seats and felt that this was the start of something special. Both the flight to

Bangkok and the onward one to Beijing were as 'smooth as silk' and before long we had landed in Beijing. Immigration and customs were a breeze and it was with some trepidation that we ventured into the arrivals hall to look for our driver. Given that we were the only Caucasians with large boxes in a sea of Chinese, we weren't too hard to find. Once we had been spotted, it didn't take long to load our bikes and panniers and of course ourselves onto the bus for the slow trip to the Peace Hotel. A little five star luxury isn't a bad way to start the trip!



Beijing to Kashgar

Beijing wasn't new to Colin but it was for the rest of us. Two nights was all the time we could afford so we packed in as much as possible - the Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square, Jingshan Park and of course the Great Wall at Simitai. The night food stalls were just amazing and full of great Asian delights which some of us had not seen before. The Wall at Badaling is the closest to Beijing and one where all tourists go to, both foreigners and Chinese, and as Colin had been there before he had no problems convincing the others to go to Simitai instead. This section is further away from Beijing and therefore not as built up or touristy. The cheapest trip to Simitai was through the Jing Hua Hotel which we booked and paid for the night before. It was only 80 Yuan (\$16) each for the whole day.

The drive took three hours with about four hours at the Wall. This gave us enough time to walk and climb about two kilometres even though it was very hot and humid. During our time at the Wall we were accompanied by some persistent Mongolian girls, constantly trying to convince us to buy their postcards and souvenirs. Our new found friends followed us, chatting away to us and each other, trying to convince us that they had the bargain of the day just for us as we were special, but it was more likely that the tourist trade was very slow in the hotter days. They were more than a little upset when we didn't buy anything and made it obvious that they were not happy.

Asia changes one's attitude toward spending money. However, if you can put your guilt to one side it becomes easier.

Our next morning was taken with a trip to Tiananman Square. Unfortunately this infamous square which will remain in the history books for both the right and wrong reasons, was partly closed. It's a sad fact of life that significant tourist attractions are closed when you are there. It would only be the cynical who would suggest that its closure was due in anyway to the fortieth anniversary of the "liberation" of Tibet. However, for this and its recent history, it is truly a remarkable place. From the picture of Mao at one end to the Aussie Kebab and MacDonal'd's takeaways at the other, it is a place on this earth like no other. For throughout the ages, probably no other piece of dirt on earth would have had so many people walk upon it!

The time passed quickly in Beijing and before too long, the day of departure arrived. We shopped in the supermarkets buying food and goodies for the long four day train ride to Urumqi.

We took our bikes to the station in the afternoon on the day of departure, as we knew we couldn't take the bikes into the carriages. Pete and Colin spent a few hours negotiating payment with a freight forwarder, recommended by Colin's local tour operator, Teddy. With our pockets weighing \$200 less, we said goodbye to our beloved and brand new bikes as we wouldn't see them again until we arrived in Urumqi, if indeed we would see them at all. And to make the journey a little easier, Teddy gave us a case of good Chinese beer.

The train left very late on Wednesday night but we didn't

know if our bikes were on board or where they were stashed. We had three nights ahead of us which we were all looking forward to. The train trip was almost a holiday in itself. In 1998 Colin had travelled by train from Beijing to St Petersburg by way of the Trans Mongolian route and had been bitten by the train bug. He fell in love with long train trips in exotic countries and this one was another to add to his list of epic train journeys. It was his idea to take the train rather than the four hour flight which Sean would be taking two days later.



On the Friday morning we arrived into Urumqi and then spent a short time haggling a price for the transportation of ourselves and our bikes to the International Hotel. Once our rooms were secured and after a cleansing shower we walked into town for some local food and beer. Although we only had one night here it accounted for two full days as our flight to Kashgar wasn't leaving until late Saturday night. We found an internet café and sent some cybertalk to our friends and family who would be working hard and who would be anxiously awaiting travel talk of our journey and experiences.

Sean caught us by surprise in Urumqi! We knew he was meeting us there but it was the way he met us that caught us un-awares. He had just flown in from Beijing and we were wandering through a daytime market near our hotel when he jumped out from behind a stall and gave us all a fright. Having travelled several times in his youthful life, his instinct directed him to our location, for where else would newly arrived travellers go but to the nearest market where all the local activity is found?

We were all together now, the six intrepid travellers who would retrace part of the route followed by so many well known and some not so well known merchants, traders, pilgrims and conquerors. Although we too were after a bit of adventure we were not after the fame, fortune and notoriety that others had sought.

Breakfast the next morning was held on the fortieth floor of the hotel. It was a revolving restaurant with 360 degree views of Urumqi, mainly hidden though by the smog which seems to cover every Chinese city. Breakfast was an elaborate affair with a

smorgasbord of both Western and Asian delights. A banquet fit for royalty. Enough food was lain before us to feed a small army, yet there were only eight people to be seen. Peter had his first experience with cross cultural communications when ordering two fried eggs, sunny side up. On this occasion, understanding on both sides was limited and provided much laughter when his eggs arrived sunny side out with the yoke completely removed! Some of us indulged in our last sweet experience by having cake and pastries for breakfast, both treats that we would leave behind for the next four weeks of our journey.

The rest of the morning was spent strolling through Hongshan Park, Urumqi's amusement park. Sean and Ken were attracted to the balloon shooting rink, and as they were both excellent shooters they managed to burst all but one balloon the guy had for the whole day. This wasn't a problem though as he kindly relieved their pockets of the princely sum of \$10 each for the privilege. The park was a combination of gardens and walkways which were scattered with electronic games as well as the more traditional palm reading and massage specialists. It was an interesting place and one frequented greatly by the local community. Under a shady tree a group of girls was practicing a traditional dance in preparation of entertaining the many visitors later in the day.

The Train to Urumqi

*The Urumqi train
snakes its way from Beijing
along the zip-like track
fusing together
the folds of the Gobi Desert's chador*

*Viewed through greying lace curtains
avenues of poplar trees contrast
with miles of rolling, dusty dunes
covered in mauve and camel-coloured scrub
choked by the inhospitable desert sands*

*On command we sit on satin and lace quilts
eat our plastic rice from plastic plates
on plastic lace-topped tables.
We rest our Western heads on Chinese lace pillows
and watch the female guards
wet-mopping the corridor's lino
in their crisp lacy shirts and immaculate suits*

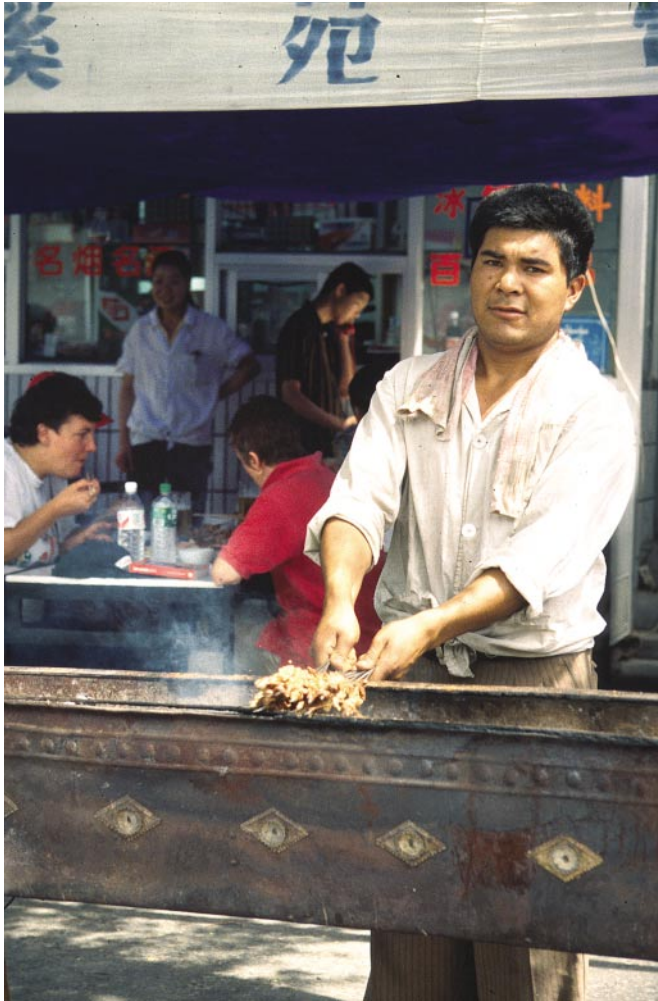
*On the other side of the lace curtains
a crimson desert sunset
illuminates majestic Great Wall towers
as we dry our faces on
drab, lace-edged towels
which double as pillow cases.
The Urumqi Express rhythmically rocks us to sleep
above the net luggage racks
and red plastic roses in their vase.
In our ruffled, rumpled lacy bunks
we dream ...*

By Lynn Craig

The view from the top of the hill within the park was one to behold. It contrasted the modern concrete jungle of downtown Urumqi with the old mud brick houses on the surrounding hill-sides. The newly created freeway that wound out of the concrete jungle seemed to disappear into the haze and dust created by life in this hot and barren place. But even the freeway was a contrast of modern cars followed by trucks laden with livestock which included camels and horses, the old and still used methods of transportation in more remote areas.

Later that day our journey started in earnest. After a bit of quick bartering we secured a truck to transport us and our still unpacked bikes and panniers to the airport for our very late evening flight to Kashgar. The airport was a dull affair and became even more so when we each received a \$40 bill for excess luggage, a very steep price but we had no choice! The alternative was a three day bus trip across the Taklamakan desert and we just didn't have the time.

It was a grand time for all of us and as we walked to the plane and saw our bikes being loaded into the cargo hold. The scene was set and our dreams seemed well on the way to being achieved. One last look around our surroundings brought our daydream back to reality with a shudder. The tyres on the old Russian-made plane were bald. Not only were they bald, but pieces of steel were poking out through the visible patches. Our minds quickly raced to the consequences of this situation. The plane would probably take off with no problem, but what would happen when we landed at Kashgar?



But there was no time for further reflection as we were ushered inside ready for take off.

Our fears were not over though. Although the plane taxied comfortably along the tarmac and the take off was smooth, we all commented that the plane was not rising as fast as it should. Night time departures are common in many hotter parts of the world as fuel expands in the wings and planes need lift which is not possible in the heat unless passenger numbers are slashed. So for economic reasons they take off at night. But this plane looked and felt very heavy for its engine power and after three minutes we were only a couple of hundred metres off the ground. Instantly fear returned. Our lives again seemed to be in jeopardy. Had we made a fatal error in flying this last 1500 kilometres? Horror stories told by many travellers before us came flooding back to mind of what remote Asian airlines were like and what little safety records any of them enjoyed. A further eight minutes went by and two wide circles above the Urumqi valley saw us at altitude and on our way, our fears subdued for the moment.

The flight landed at Kashgar just before midnight and without incident. Although our fears had been real, we all arrived safely. Time was taken to get our equipment from the plane and before we could negotiate a taxi ride into town, the lights were turned off. It was a dark, cloudy night and light rain had begun to fall. There were only a few people and vehicles left in the carpark and we were in a strange unfamiliar place.

We were unsure where to go and none of us could speak the local language. This was not a favourable position and our options were running out fast.

We were here to cycle down the Karakorum Highway into Pakistan, so we had the option of unpacking our bikes and cycling in which ever direction town was, or unpacking our tents and camping at the airport. We decided we didn't want to do either. Our hotel had been booked and paid for in advance - we didn't want to waste the money and we all wanted that last comfort of a soft bed before cycling out into the unknown desert and mountains.

Finally, we negotiated a deal with a truck driver and two of his mates who had cars. Mind you, we weren't really in the best position to negotiate, but were happy with the price, which was very fair considering our predicament. We hauled our bikes and gear on board the truck. Ken offered to go with the truckies while the rest of us jumped into the cars.

This short taxi trip provided us with another cultural experience. The drivers insisted on Lynn and Caron being in the front seat. This meant that we were separated by steel mesh. Sean found this unacceptable as from a Western cultural point of view a safety issue arose as they were isolated in the front. If something were to happen, no action could be implemented. However, this attitude of mistrust was neither needed nor warranted. The customary position for women to ride in such vehicles in North Eastern China is in the front and not the back as a Westerner would. The important knowledge gained was to

be more tolerate of what is not understood, not withstanding that safety issues are always important and personal safety is the most precious thing you have while travelling.

The journey into Kashgar was one of the most exciting trips any of us had ever undertaken from an airport. Arriving at night is never easy in a strange place but this was different. The road was shocking - there were potholes deep and wide, it was also rather narrow. Dust billowed everywhere and the whole place swarmed, a hotbed of humanity and livestock. The town was alive. Night stalls bustled with business and preparations for the famous Sunday market were in full swing. In a few hours we would be part of it. All we had to do was get to our hotel, have a shower and grab a few hours sleep.



Ken's thoughts on that trip on from the airport.

The boy stood on the burning deck, a pocket full of crackers. There was a flash and then a crash ... No, things weren't quite that bad, but it had been a hell of a day.

Firstly there had been the trip by Russian jet from Urumqui to Kashgar. While walking across the tarmac Sean had noticed that pieces of the shiny steel belts were poking through the rubber, on the tyres on our jet. A small, but unnerving little detail for us all, as we watched our bikes being hand loaded into the belly of the plane we were about to board.

Then there was the number of times that our jet had circled the airport to gain sufficient altitude for the flight to Kashgar, and the passenger across the narrow aisle from me who looked and sounded like he wasn't going to land at Kashgar alive. Throughout the entire trip he prayed continually like a man possessed, and tried to squash the armrests into pulp with his bare hands, whilst sweating profusely and assuming a deathly colour.

We managed to land safely at Kashgar Airport, a metal hangar in the desert some fourteen kilometres from the city. It was nearing midnight but I had no idea really as most of China works on Beijing time.

After the usual collecting of baggage and in our case, our boxed cycles, we found ourselves trying to make deals to get to town with some locals who were only too aware of our predicament - and perhaps only too eager to exploit our situation to their maximum advantage.

Peter had made a deal with a local to take our gear into town at a rip off price, but at least we had a way of getting our gear to the city. I decided that it wasn't going to be all the local's way and asked Peter to keep him busy talking, while I tried my hand at dealing with other locals outside the hangar.

I managed to extract a better deal, half the price we were previously stuck with and it sure beat the hell out of unpacking and assembling the cycles and riding into town. Everything was now going beautifully, or so we thought. What we had overlooked was that the flat top truck on which we now had all our worldly possessions, needed to be closely guarded.

When you consider that the average wage in this area is approximately three hundred dollars Australian per year and in bikes alone, there was approximately six thousand dollars displayed openly on the tray of the truck. This was excluding the rest of our precious gear, all necessary for the real adventure on which we were about to embark.

I couldn't help thinking that this was a bit like someone driving all over Melbourne with a million dollars in cash sitting on the back of an open tray truck in full view of everyone, stopping here and there at will, in very crowded and sometimes dark places, and expecting at the end of the journey to find all the money still there.

The truck driver wouldn't allow any of us to ride in or on the back of the truck with our gear because the local police wouldn't like it, or so he said. But after a lot of negotiation I managed to secure a seat for myself in the truck, enabling me to keep watch on our possessions. What I didn't count on though, was that I would be riding in the front of the truck with a large knife carrying local perched on each side of me, with little hope of making a mad dash out to the rear of the truck should someone take a fancy to any of our gear.

The only saving grace, in my mind, was that at least I had four friends riding in taxis, some in front and some travelling behind, should I require any help. I was just starting to feel a bit more relaxed about this arrangement when my friends taxi honked the horn as they sped past the truck I was travelling in and both taxis disappeared into clouds of dust, leaving me alone in the truck, with my new found friends.

As we slowed to negotiate deep trenches on the so called main highway to town and then later, travelling down the dusty narrow alleys between double storied mudbrick houses in the middle of the night with our treasure on the tray of the truck and people swarming everywhere, I wondered if I would get to see my friends again or, whether I might be found dead in one of these dingy backstreet alleys, relieved unceremoniously of all our necessary hi-tech gear before our real adventure could begin.

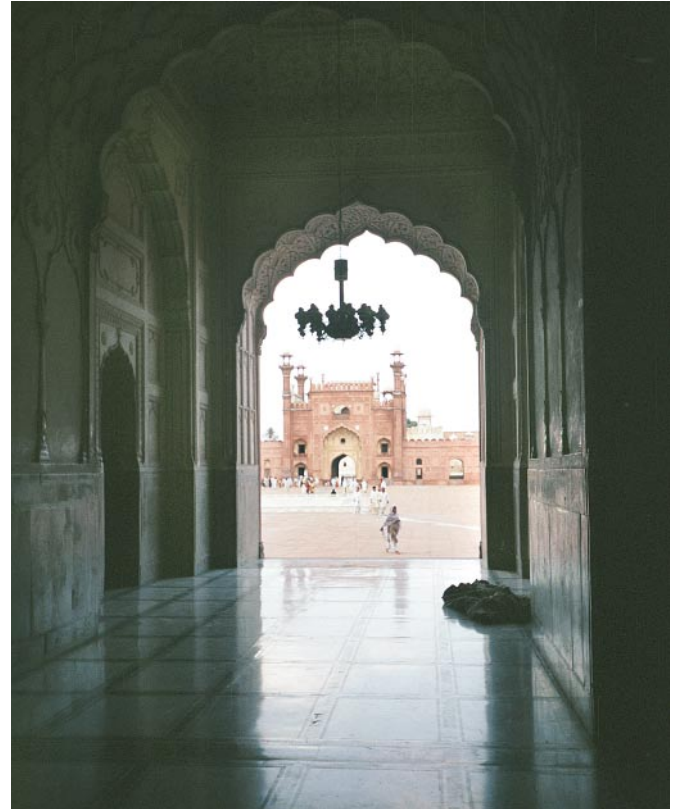
Eventually, we arrived at the hotel in the wee small hours of the morning, ourselves and all our treasures still intact. The truck driver and his mate had fulfilled their part of the deal and I fulfilled mine by paying up, including a small bonus for a job well done, relieved and grateful for arriving alive.

On arrival at the hotel, the staff informed us that we weren't booked in, a worrying problem at such a late hour but one that was soon rectified by questioning the staff a little further. Our hotel, with a similar name, stood approximately two hundred yards away and we soon established that this was indeed the correct hotel and we soon had all our gear safely installed inside our rooms.

It had been a long but satisfying day as we had successfully risen to all the challenges that were thrown at us in a country which because of the language barrier, is reputed to be the hardest place in the world in which to travel.

We celebrated our arrival with a few bottles of warm, Chinese beer, and even though the night was very hot and still, we could hear the sounds of people milling about on the streets below. Sleep came easily to us all.

Sleep, of course, never really came. Excitement, anticipation, a few celebratory beers and the desire to be in the market at daybreak kept us awake. The bikes could wait so they stayed in their boxes until later that day.





Kashgar

The dawn was quickly upon us and after a hurried breakfast we climbed aboard a donkey cart and ventured into the market. Kashgar was all we wanted it to be and more. The market alone was truly a trip of a lifetime. Everything we had read or had been told about it couldn't really do it justice. It has been a trading centre on the Silk Road for hundreds of years and its Sunday market is one of the biggest in Asia. The population of Kashgar can more than double overnight with Uyghur, Kyrgyz and Tajik traders coming in from the surrounding areas to trade their wares and livestock.

The only Han Chinese in Kashgar were the police and the army. Much of their ancestry originates from former Russian states and further to the Middle East, the areas of the old Ottoman Empire and therefore, many people are Arabic or Turkic in appearance.

The people we found on this day are a proud race and one that wanted for little. The signs of 20th century technology are present with a television here and credit card swipe machine there, but nobody seemed to be in any hurry to change the life style they had enjoyed and endured for many centuries.

Their clothes are bright and neatly cared for, no different to any western culture going to a Sunday market. The shoppers are both men and women which seem a little unusual given the high population of people who follow the Islamic faith.

The women were not covered up from head to toe as in many other Islamic areas of the world.

What an experience the market was! It was like stepping into a fairy tale. We took photos, we talked with the locals, we bargained fiercely for provisions that we would need once we set out on our cycling journey. We stocked up on fresh nuts, fruit and vegetables to supplement dehydrated food we had brought with us. We intended to eat local food as much as possible, but on long stretches where civilisation could not be reached, we would camp and provide our own meals.



We wandered endlessly through the narrow alleyways absorbing anything and everything. We bought souvenirs, hats and clothes - a bit silly really given that this was just the beginning of our adventure and we were about to cycle over a thousand kilometres and climb up to the four thousand seven hundred metre high, Kunjerab pass. All of us knew we would probably never be here again and who cared if we didn't have the room? If we would break a spoke or two, it didn't matter, the allure of the market was too great.

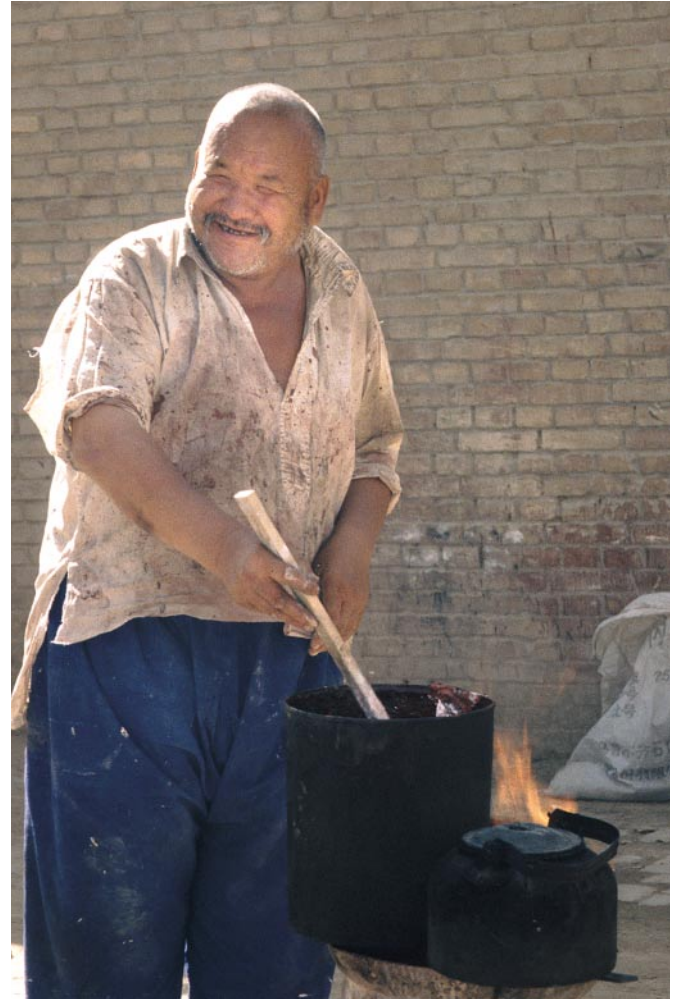
We were not helped by the up and coming salesmen in the form of young boys who were eager to clinch the sale of a decorative knife, a bone handled whip or even a pet budgie or duck. Ken, who had spent many years as a salesman, had met his match. Even though he thought he had a good deal, one could not help but think our local salesmen had probably done a little better.



All around us was the hussle and bustle of life in this remote part of the world. Families were arriving on the only transport available to them, on foot, by bicycle or by donkey and cart. Farmers were walking their animals to market weaving around the more fortunate ones who could afford the bus or even a private motor vehicle. However, along with this came that inevitable scourge that plagues all Asian cities, the ever present honking car horn.

The animal market is an integral part of the Sunday market and is an experience for any western city dweller. Donkeys, goats, sheep, horses, cattle and ducks are all sold, bought or exchanged depending on individual needs. There were raised voices, arguments and wild gesticulation when there appeared to be no real rush. Perhaps it was all theatrics? Most livestock was inspected thoroughly before deals were made. We watched a young bull struggling before being tied down, then hoisted onto the top of a donkey cart. This took nearly half an hour in the increasing morning heat. Chickens were precariously tied to bicycle handlebars. Sheep and goats were tied tightly together and led away to their inevitable fate. But for some unfortunate souls the end was near, as the butcher shops lined up on the footpath were all selling fresh meat as well as other local delicacies including certain parts of lambs.

Many hours were spent in this endless ocean of new sights and experiences, but as the midday sun scorched our pale winter skins we headed for shade and the task of preparing our bikes. We were fortunate in that they had arrived in relatively good condition, with little need for repair. Two hours later and a mess that would keep us busy for another hour and our bikes were up and running. We all pitched in and helped each other as on a journey with 6 travellers we all had varying skills that individually would be called upon to assist us collectively.





Kashgar to Tashgurgan

Monday saw us cycling through the quiet suburbs for the start of the first stage to Tashgurgan, some two hundred and seventy kilometres to the southeast. It was hot and probably 40 degrees Celsius, and as we all had personal items to attend too, we arranged to meet at John's Café, which was strategically situated on the road out of town. After 2 hours Ken had still not arrived. The rest of us had dined on rice and meat followed by John's notorious Silk Road Sunday. We became concerned for Ken but as we were about to muster a search party he arrived having spent 2 hours waiting for us, and had finally found the café. This was unfortunate, as we all had thought that a good trip starts by being together without misunderstanding.

But now we were ready! One year in the planning and training, the rides to the beach and the ride up Mt Hotham that Sean had insisted upon to give us an idea about the effects of altitude came to mind. The ride along the hills and dirt roads of Gippsland to get us used to the roads that we would have experienced in Tibet and the ride to Rye back beach that had been as much fun, as it was training, had all come to this point in time. It had all been worthwhile and now we were ready to leave this ancient city and head along the old Silk Road. This was our turn in history to travel and explore this vital trade route.

Colin had to buy some film on the way out of town and in doing so the team was split into two. Caron and Peter went with him while Sean, Lynn and Ken cycled ahead. There were two

roads out of town, one new and one old - Lynn, Ken and Sean took the new one. Sean had said that they would keep cycling until the others caught up but not knowing how long the old road was the others thought they were still behind them. Colin, Pete and Caron waited for a short period and then cycled back into town along the old road looking for the others. This meant there was nearly two hours cycling time between the two groups. We were disappointed at ourselves for another misunderstanding and all hoped that this was not an omen for the rest of the trip.

It was easy cycling along flat roads shaded by popular trees. It was watermelon season and for just a few cents we could quench our thirst on juicy slices or even whole melons as our thirst dictated. This whole area is mainly desert with irrigation canals keeping the fields alive. The Pamir mountains were ahead of us and it was their snow melt which fed these canals. Eventually both parties met up next to an apricot plantation. Lynn's group was gorging themselves on apricots straight from the tree when the others caught up. This was the edge of the irrigated land and before us lay a wasteland which resembled pictures received from the Mars Rover Project. Nightfall was not far away so it was good that everyone was together and ready for the first night 'on the road'.

While waiting for the others, Ken struck up communication of sorts with a group of local men who had gathered around to watch these strange gringos with even stranger bicycles. A tall handsome man from the local village had run back home and come back with a bag full of apricots. We hesitantly ate our first

one not knowing where they came from or what water had been sprayed on them. Normally this is not a problem, but we were far from home in a land where sanitary conditions are often very favourable to picking up e-coli and Hepatitis from fresh unwashed vegies and fruit. However, once we had one it no longer mattered as it was too late anyway and the superb taste of these local fruits evaporated our caution.

Our bearer of fruits was also very helpful in showing us how to crack open the apricot stone to extract the nut inside. This small nut tasted a little like an almond and was a similar shape. Ken had been itching to use his newly acquired "Leatherman" tool and could not resist the temptation to crack a couple of nuts himself. Our local friend had used the blunt back edge of his knife for this task with much skill and success. Unfortunately, Ken's expertise at using the Leatherman's pliers was not up to the same standard and to an uproar of laughter from all around he managed to squash the apricot stone into a thousand pieces.



*This is an entry from Caron's Diary
the following day.*

Woke up late, I decided not to go to breakfast. Mucked around getting water and packing the bike. Then headed off to John's Café to have brunch. Ken got lost! We all headed off together then two pairs of three riders divided and we all got lost! Peter and I rode back to make sure the others weren't waiting for us. Then we kept on riding hoping they were up ahead. We stopped for melon and had a great time with the locals, checking out our bikes.

I'm hot and tired and getting a cold.

We eventually catch up with the others and I'm very glad to see them. We ride on for a bit. Up to now the scenery has been farming land irrigated and there are loads of poplar trees. Now we are in the desert. Nothing but sand and rocks. We're all tired so we decided to stop between two sand hills, put the tents up and have a little for dinner. Then the wind starts and the dust blows and it blows and it blows. This really tops off the day! I'm awake all night blowing my nose and feel like shit! The wind just keeps blowing and the DUST!!

This is without doubt the worst camping night of my life!



By now it was late afternoon and the wind was picking up. Sand was being blown everywhere but the trees gave us a little shade. We then made our next error in judgement. We should have stopped for the night within the confines of this oasis of apricot trees, but we didn't. We kept going as we wanted to put a few more kilometres between us and Kashgar.

Ten kilometres on, we left the tree cover and were into the desert with a fierce wind which couldn't make up its mind which way to blow. One minute it would be to the side and slightly behind, happily pushing us along and then the next minute it would be ahead of us. There is nothing more soul destroying to a cyclist than a constant headwind or a wind which can't decide what to do. Add to that the abrasive particles of sand, and you have a recipe for total frustration and anger. Eventually we thought it was time to camp but there was just nowhere to put up the tents and get protection from the wind and the sand. We gave Sean the job of scouting for a suitable camp site, or maybe he just volunteered - either way he took off into the sand storm. Eventually he found a flat-bedded ditch behind some dunes out of sight of the road. It wasn't ideal but would suffice. The omnipresent wind was still with us and sand was being blown everywhere.

Colin and Sean had thought that the wind would probably slow down and were keen to sleep under the stars as male egos often do. Although it was still blowing a gale, the others battled to put up their tents and crawled inside. Meanwhile Colin and Sean set up camp by rolling their sleeping bags out on the

ground and trying to find shelter next to their bikes. But the wind was still unrelenting and sand was being blown everywhere. Just like the Blues Brothers, they put on their sunglasses. Not a pretty sight really but it was an attempt to avoid the stinging wind blown minute sand particles getting into their eyes.



They decided they had three choices. They could zip up their sleeping bags up and become a virtual oven but semi insulated from the sand and wind, they could unzip

the bag and face the elements and maybe have the bag ripped off them and blown into oblivion or they could put up their tent.

According to Colin, who has camped and slept out all over the world in mountains, in jungles, in deserts and on beaches, this was the worst night ever. Not the best start to any trip. The wind was still growing in strength until it almost reached storm proportions. Erecting tents in the wind is not an easy task at the best of times but it was almost impossible in this sandstorm. Were the elements trying to tell us something? It was Sean's tent and Colin helped him put it up. But this was no ordinary tent.

Here is Colin's account of what happened.

I suggested to Sean that it would be best to put the panniers in the tent to stop it blowing away but Sean didn't like this idea. "You have to put the pegs in first", said Sean. I piped up by saying that "it would be much simpler to get the poles in first". Remember it was Sean's tent but I thought I knew better. Anyway it wasn't the time to argue so Sean told me to get the eight pegs out of the bag. But I could only find six. "No Colin", stated Sean, "there are eight pegs, I know because it is my tent and I packed the bloody thing". I looked again and still only counted six pegs. The others were chuckling away inside the shelter of their tents.

So Sean came over and checked and found six pegs. He must have counted and recounted them a dozen times. He had put eight in and now there were only six. We were two tent pegs short. In Sean's haste to prepare and study for exams before leaving, and his desire to cut weight to the least possible, he had inadvertently left two pegs behind. So we asked the others. Pete and Stan must have fallen asleep or were laughing so much they couldn't talk. So we tried Ken. Ken was laughing as we knocked on his door. Ken carries everything an outdoor enthusiast needs, and more. Of course he had two spare pegs. "Can we please borrow them." "Well" he said with a bit of irony in his voice, "you knock me for carrying too much and now you want two pegs." "Please Ken," we begged, "we'll be your best friend." Anyway he came up with the goods and passed them out through the narrowest opening in the tent zip.

Eventually we got the tent up and our gear inside but everything was full of sand. I had a small bottle of whisky which I had bought duty free so we celebrated our success with a few sips before fading away to our inner thoughts. Sleep was hard to come by. Outside the storm raged on and inside sleep was impossible as the sand in the sleeping bag was like sandpaper. I dozed as often as possible before morning woke me with thoughts that life could only get better.

And indeed morning brought better conditions and we spent some time trying to get as much sand as possible out of our clothing and bags before breakfast. Sometimes time becomes quite irrelevant when travelling - a better measure is daylight and darkness. And so we tried to make the most of the daylight hours. As we jumped onto our bikes the following morning the sun was rising behind the vast bulk of Mt Kongur (7719m). The wind was still quite fierce and it was already hot so we didn't hang around. The next oasis town was Upal where we were welcomed into a non-descript little restaurant and offered omelettes, green tea and nan bread. Like all other countries in Asia, bottled water is everywhere but with it comes the pollution of the empty bottles. Sean had brought a water pump with an iodine filter with him so he didn't buy any bottles at all. The rest of us had brought iodine tablets but occasionally we would become weak and buy some cold bottles. The kids chased us for the empties as they would use them for their own purposes. But eventually they would end up being thrown onto the desert and add to China's ever increasing environmental disaster.

After filling our water bottles at the local bank and enjoying the hospitality of the bank manager who insisted we help ourselves to the ripe juicy apricots on his apricot tree, we cycled out of Upal. There wasn't much shade along the route so whenever we found some we would stop and rest, or write our diaries or talk with the locals. At one little oasis we even played football with some young children. It was a dry heat and the sun was relentless on our backs and heads. Dehydration was a constant

battle and we had to keep reminding each other to keep up the fluid intake.

Our next campsite was our last before heading up into the mountains towards the Khunjerab Pass and Pakistan. From the comfort of our camp site we enjoyed the hazy setting sun changing the colours of the barren hills which formed the gateway to the Pamir mountains. An early departure the next morning saw us arriving at a small town at about 0900 for breakfast. We again gorged on omelettes and watermelons which tasted delicious and gave us some energy but for some of us, this was not an ideal combination on a very delicate stomach.

Ken, Lynn and Peter had picked up a stomach ailment that made cycling very uncomfortable at best. By midday we were stretched out in a small cave trying to escape the hot, unrelenting sun and to regain some strength for our continued journey. Our main concern was maintaining body fluid and salts. In these conditions you may need up to seven or eight litres of liquid a day but with a small dose of diarrhoea this can be eight or nine.





Salt replacement was a constant problem as well, and we were constantly heading for our medical stashes and electrolyte powders to add to our water. Sean had brought tubs of “Gatarade” which are an electrolyte anyway and a source of body salt replacement which he regularly added to his water.

The KKH is the only highway between China and Pakistan and although it is sealed, there isn’t much traffic. The cycle from Kashgar to Tashgurgan took seven fantastic days. It was mostly uphill with one long downhill stretch of 70 kilometres. It was a contrast of hot, dry and dusty areas with very little shade and surrounded by glaciated, 7000 metre plus, mountains. We escaped the midday heat by sheltering under bridges, in caves or under the trees in any oasis we could find between the long desert stretches. The massive bulk of Mt Kongur dominated the horizon for the first few days and it was hard to believe the contrast between the seven thousand metre snow capped peaks and the lunar scape we were cycling through. This contrast created its own beauty and together with the silence, the cycling was inspirational.

On the third day we arrived in the small village of Ghez. We had found a cave to escape the midday heat and after some munchies and much need rest and re-hydration we cycled steeply up to this small military check-point. Ghez could have been anywhere but should have been somewhere else.

A note from Caron's diary describes it well.

There are hostels on the other side of the check post, we bargain for a room. It has a dirt floor, newspaper on the walls and 6 single beds. It costs us 5 yuan each which is just less than an Australian dollar. I get chatting to some kids that are very friendly. It's 3 days now since I've had a shower. I'm outside just looking around and one of the women I've been talking to is pumping water from a big barrel. I ask if there is anywhere to have a wash. Luckily she understands, she leads me to a shed down by the river that has the clearest pool or Roman bath in it. I'm so excited. She shows me how to work it and I'm in. The other 5 are not far behind me. This is the best find so far, who would have thought out in this desert would be such a luxury.

An extract from the diary of Ken gives us an insight into what he was feeling at this time.

It had been a long hard day's cycling. I'd had the shits for a week and felt like dying, we'd just arrived at the Chinese Checkpoint at Ghez.

Those bloody melons which my doctor had warned me about before leaving Australia and whose advice my seasoned travelling mates had described as crap, had done their work well. I could have backed up and shot through the eye of a needle at sixty paces without a problem and I was a great contender for the record for the minimum time taken, for good food to pass through the human body.

Incidentally, this condition lasted over four weeks and in the course of the first three weeks while in China and Pakistan, I managed to lose over a stone in weight. On returning home to Australia and visiting my friendly doctor, the re-telling of this tale seemed to bring much amusement into his life as he sat and listened and smiled a lot.

He's not an easy man to get a smile of amusement out of, but in this instance, he smiled lots.

Anyhow back to the story.

Every time I stopped riding and parked my cycle there was always the same irresistible urge that overtook me, the mad search through panniers to locate my ever diminishing supply of toilet paper followed by the frenzied race for a bush (a very hard item to find, above the tree line in the high altitude desert, in which we were cycling). This madness continued at very irregular intervals, commencing just out of Kashgar and remained until after we returned to Australia. You never knew just when it would strike, although it was always a good bet that the urge would take control, usually at the end of every meal, if you were lucky. I think that everyone was starting to feel sorry for me. Regardless, I peddled on.

Colin even offered fatherly advice, saying that if it was him he would let it pass through his system without the intervention of medicine of any sort. Pills would bung up your system and cause greater problems later on.

I should have learned after his previous advice regarding the melons, but I obviously didn't, despite the fact that I was carrying a very pretty First Aid Kit containing every conceivable medical potion and device known to the western world. It contained nearly enough gear to cure anything from a headache or to facilitate the removal of piles, and speaking of piles, Colins' fatherly advice had sentenced me to a further stint of riding and shitting and shitting and riding. When would I ever learn?

The best piece of high tech equipment that I had brought along was my highly prized Trek cycle, a fine piece of machinery with a most wonderful accessory, a tiny, little, wedge shaped seat. It positioned itself very tightly between my cheeks (butt cheeks for the uninitiated) and saved me from embarrassing myself in a very big way on a multitude of occasions as well as making it a little more difficult to track my

progress along the KKH, if you get my meaning. Ghez Checkpoint, was a low point for me. My melon wound had severely weakened me and I had to force feed myself with the food we bought in order to keep my strength up. I couldn't afford to end up in bed here, in the mountains, in the middle of a high altitude desert with only my first aid kit for company. We stayed overnight here, in a mudbrick adobe owned by locals, who were in cahoots with the military guard on duty at the checkpoint who incidentally, had recommended this establishment. Nepotism is alive and well, even in China, I mused.

Looking at a map and on consulting our copy of Lonley Planet, we found that the next few days were going to involve some heavy uphill riding, so I ate as much food as possible and kept my mind focused on the big job ahead of us.

Ghez was a wondrous place. It boasted a very spic and span Military Guard (complete with the latest airforce style sunglasses), who greeted us at the boom, looking for all the world like he'd just stepped straight out of a James Bond movie set. Another military guard displayed incredible powers, enabling him to squat in the men's squat dunny and crap to his heart's content whilst reading a paper about the size of the Melbourne Age. If you think that's easy, give it a go sometime.

The checkpoint also had a compound with a high fence in which the guards kept their large vicious dogs during daylight hours and like most dogs in outback China, they would be let loose at night. A rather scary prospect for a bloke with the shits, especially considering that the only toilet structure was on the dog's side of the checkpoint fence. That night I made sure that I visited the crapper just before close up time, I wasn't retrieving my sorry bitten bum out of the jaws of these murderous looking mongrels. The sight of Sean, Colin, or Peter trying to bandage my bloody bum would not be a pretty one, not to mention the ribbing that I'd get.

Ghez also had a small bath-house of sorts, which Stan had pointed out to her by a local girl. It was only a few hundred metres out of town and Stan and her

new friend went to check it out. I wandered along behind them, also wanting a look. A bath in warm water was more than any of us had in over a week and it sounded very attractive. It was just fine, a little rugged by western standards, but we were very happy. I stayed at the bath-house to keep our spot in case a queue started and Stan came back with her bathing gear and Colin, who had also heard the news about the bath house.

Stan bathed, while Colin and I kept watch outside the building, after which Colin road tested the bath-house. He then made a gallant gesture, offering me his towel and soap as I hadn't had time to retrieve my gear from my panniers. I graciously accepted his offer.

As I entered the building I was thinking what a good mate he was, but this was to be short lived as I had just placed my things down when he yelled from outside, "And don't wipe your arse-hole on my towel".

So much for mates and kind gestures I thought, anyhow, his towel was light blue, and any action of this nature would be easily detected, although a bit of dirt and water, strategically placed, would have provided a lot of entertainment for all of us.

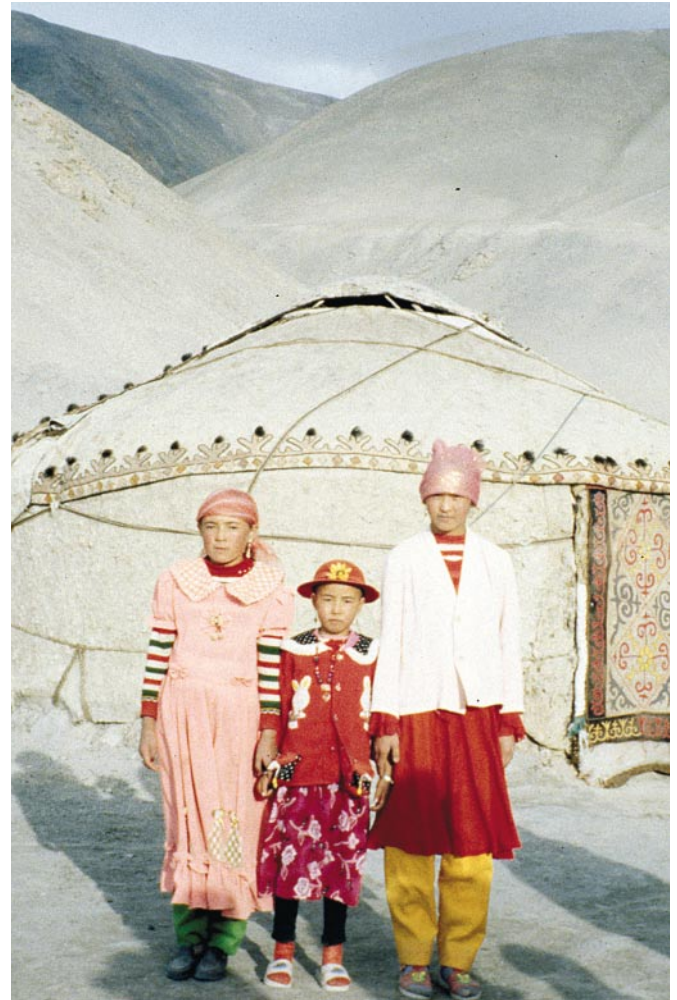
The next morning we cycled out of Ghez, all in one piece. The night had been relatively uneventful other than being bitten up one leg by bed bugs. Around dawn I emerged from our room armed with my toilet roll, only to find that the gate to the toilet was still locked. Approaching a local and using a few gestures to explain my urgent need, he threw his hands in the air as much as to say, the whole worlds the dunny, take your pick. I soon found out what he meant, as heading towards the only bit of cover around, near the river, it was hard to find a place to put your feet. Obviously most of the locals liked a dunny with a view.

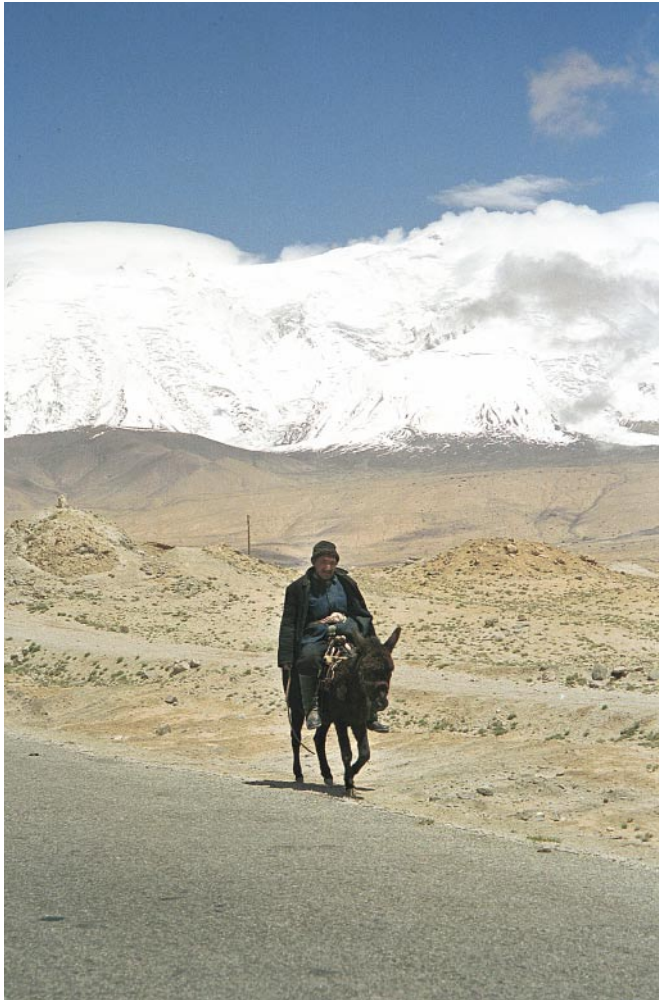
Whilst looking for a camp site one evening we stumbled upon some nomadic Kirghiz yurts. A yurt is a round semi permanent tent which the nomadic people of this area live in during the summer months whilst grazing their animals. The whole village congregated around us, amazed and excited. We were made most welcome and invited to stay with them for the night - at a price of course. An inspection of a yurt followed and then we enjoyed some fun and animated bargaining. It cost us about four dollars each to drink yak-butter tea, eat some rice, bread and some tough goat meat and to spend the night - five star accommodation at half star prices.

Here at the yurts as in many cultures the women performed the evening milking of their yaks, goats and sheep. The men seemed to stand around and talk a lot but didn't appear to do anything. When we arrived, the men were not in the village as they were tending their stock which were grazing on the barren hills surrounding the village. However, they were back pretty soon once the word was out that there some strange foreigners in town. Ken was of the opinion that these animals were the most hardy he had ever seen as there was little more than rocks to be found on the hills where the animals grazed.

Sean took the opportunity to return to his agricultural background by helping to hand milk the animals, but the women were uncomfortable with a strange man performing a task which was their nightly ritual so this nostalgic journey was short lived.

The woman of the yurt seemed to be no stranger to the free market and knew how to make money. They don't see many





tourists up there asides from the odd cyclist but they had some souvenirs ready just in case. Lynn even bought the bangle worn by the grandmother but turned down an offer of her wedding ring! We couldn't help but wonder whether this was just a sales gimmick to secure a purchase or if they were the real items. We had to believe that they were for the tourist market. Maybe the real jewellery was hidden in some goatskin safely guarded in another location. A true indication of a pure, modern, free market based on supply and demand at work.

Although our experience at the yurts had made the whole journey worthwhile, more adventure lay ahead. The next morning we headed past the vast glaciers which flowed down from Mt Kongar and cycled on to Karakol Lake and our first clear views of Mustaga Ata. This mountain captured the imagination of Peter, Colin and Sean who immediately formed ideas and dreams of returning to this sacred place and taking on the challenge of climbing this 7,500 metre snow and ice mountain. This challenge would be a true test of skill and endurance which is not encountered by even the most hardy of travellers and one that would take much planing.

As the evening sun descended over Karakol lake, the last gasps of sun light brightly lit up the peak of Mustagh Ata in brilliant yellows and pinks. The warmth of the sun was quickly replaced by cold mountain air tumbling down its side and over the smooth lake surface until it penetrated to the very inside of our summer sleeping bags. This, in turn brought frost and ice in the morning which made for a very slow start.



The cold however was quickly replaced by hot humid air as the sun's rays beat down on us once more removing all memory of our one and only cold night.

The rest of the morning was spent slowly plodding up hill for some 30 kilometres. The final 10 kilometres before lunch saw most of us off our bikes and walking. The long switchbacks were a testing time for our fitness. We could cycle with much difficulty at five kilometres per hour or walk our bikes at a comfortable pace of 4 kilometres. The difference was not substantial and at times we took the opportunity to not only conserve energy but to take a more leisurely view of our spectacular



surroundings. There was no time limit as we were self-contained so we could take as long as we wanted and could camp in places of which most people could only dream.

Once at the top of the switchback, a 70 kilometre downhill stretch lay before us to Tashgurgan. After days cycling uphill, this downhill roller coaster ride was a joy to behold. With speeds approaching 70 kilometres per hour, Sean, Peter and Ken took off and at times the landscape just flashed past their eyes. Colin Lyn and Stan took it a little more cautiously but it was still a great feeling freewheeling through the Pamir Mountains with hardly any other vehicle in sight. This was not without mishap though, as at these speeds and carrying 30 -35 kilograms of food and equipment something had to give. Sean's rear tyre blew out

and fractured with a combination of weight, the immense heat generated by the friction as well as possible low tyre pressure. The support to Lynn's handle bar bag also broke and she was lucky that no part entered her spinning spokes

This was a small price to pay for relief from the monotonous up hill struggle. Around one bend and only fifteen kilometres short of Tashgurgan we found another picturesque campsite next to a small romantic stream. Why rush into town when there was another chance to sleep under the stars?





Tashgurgan to Khunjerab Pass

Tashgurgan is a small nondescript frontier town that doubles as the Chinese customs and immigration point even though it is still 140 kilometres from the official boarder. It was an opportunity to have an easy day and catch up on washing and other household chores that you can never leave behind. Although basic in nature, Tashgurgan did provide some unexpected surprises such as spare mountain bike tyres, fruit and vegetables, fresh cake and above all, cold beer. We were on top of the world and after we booked into our hotel we went downstairs to a restaurant, sat at an outside table and enjoyed salty omelettes and cold beer. This is what life is all about. Sean found a barbers shop and the four guys enjoyed a relaxing cut-throat razor shave which took half an hour each and cost less than a dollar.



There were a number of basic but excellent restaurants which provided some very authentic Chinese pasta for lunch.

The customs and immigration point on the outskirts of town was our last major check point before Sost in Pakistan some 200 kilometres away. Between, lay a no-mans land which provided very little in the way of civilisation and even less in terms of accommodation. As we gained altitude towards the pass, the sun become increasingly severe. The UV levels were approaching extreme danger levels and any exposed skin was punished harshly. Blisters appeared on the back of our hands and without head protection a headache developed within minutes. This was harsh country but it provided us all with some of our best ever travel experiences.

At ascent was slow and short stops were common. At one of these stops Sean stopped behind the others and steadied his bike by putting his feet on the road surface. In normal circumstances this is not a problem, but with the intensity of the climate the tar had actually melted. When he started to move off again both his shoes and bike tyres were stuck to the road surface. Although it was very amusing to the rest of us we knew it would take a while to clean it off. He would have to cycle carefully as the sticky tar could attract little sharp stones which might cause a puncture. It took two days to completely remove the tar from the tyre tread.

A little further on a herd of grazing camels which had been left to fend for themselves provided some visual relief from the desolate surroundings. Not far from here we encountered another group of cyclists heading in the other direction having

already crossed the pass. This was a great opportunity to swap information about road conditions ahead as well as talk about 'life in the saddle.' One piece of very welcome advice was a warning about a pack of dogs at the next little town of Parili. However, when we arrived, the dogs were all asleep in the midday sun and as per the saying "let sleeping dogs lie," we slipped in and out of town without any mongrel movement.

Even though we were making good time, the 140 kilometre distance to Khunjerab was a two and half day ride. Resting early on the first day saw us camped in rice fields above the Tashgurgan river which we had been following for sometime. Sean had brought fishing tackle along with him in the hope of providing dinner at some stage, but to date had not shown any great skill in angling. On this occasion he had support from an illegal local Pakistani immigrant. Upon his return to camp, a catch of 6 small brook trout was produced. We were all happy for him having finally made the effort of carrying his fishing gear along worthwhile. But we were misguided as a subsequent confession informed us how his new found friend, being puzzled at his rod and lures, stamped his feet on the banks and then used his hands to scoop out the trout.

In contrast to the sandstorm of the first night, our last night in China was without doubt one of the best nights. We camped just below the 4,700 metre Khunjerab Pass which marked the frontier between China and Pakistan. We stumbled on a terrific little campsite in a small pocket of green; carpeted with buttercups and a few fast flowing irrigation canals bubbling

through. The ground was soft and the tents were pitched easily. There was still about four hours of daylight left so we just relaxed, drank tea, read books, wrote our diaries and leisurely cooked a meal.

Just before dinner a local farmer wandered by, tending to the watering need of his crops. A short time later we noticed that water was starting to flow through our idyllic campsite. One of our tents was only moments away from being the awash with water but some swift action by all of us we managed to move it to higher ground just in time. We were not sure if this was an accident or indeed a humorous act by our local farmer - either way, it added to the long list of near misses and events that will forever be our memory of this unique journey.





The next morning saw us preparing for the crossing of the pass. Lynn had not adjusted to the altitude as well as the rest of us, so she headed early with Colin, so that she could pace herself to the top. The slower the better at this altitude. However the mountain scenery was so wonderful that her headache was never really noticed.

Khunjerab was a cold, desolate and windy place. At the same time there were some tremendous views of more high snow-capped mountains and it marked an achievement to have actually cycled up here in the first place. It not only marked the frontier between the two countries but also the watershed between two of the world's great mountain ranges, the Pamir and the Karakoram. We were still in no man's land as we had passed through Chinese immigration and customs back in Tashgurgan and we were not due through the Pakistani side until Sost, still 70 kilometres away downhill.

There was also a little solitary shed with two Pakistani police officers in attendance. Their excitement at seeing six western cyclists was barely contained. After exchanging pleasantries and a quick chat we stayed long enough to savour the lonely beauty and take a few photos as at nearly five thousand metres we were short of breath and really looking forward to the downhill ride to Sost.

One sign stood out from the rest and one which we really had to pay attention to. It reminded us to cycle on the left side of the road as in China we had been reading on the right hand side. As long as we didn't forget as we were racing downhill!



Khunjerab Pass to Karimabad

Of course the longed for downhill ride didn't go as planned (it never does) as the wind and fate played their hands. The guide-book had warned us that the wind would be very strong and could be from any direction. Guess what? It was head on so that we had to pedal rather strongly in order to keep our downhill momentum!

Not only was it hot, dry, dusty and windy but Colin also broke a spoke. It just seemed so unfair! It is not often you get a good down hill ride but we had all been looking forward to this one and it had been hard earned. There was no shade and it took both Ken and himself an interminably long hour to fix it. Then they still had to catch the others. But they found them not too far ahead at the Wildlife and Forestry checkpoint of Dih where we decided to stop for the night. We were a little disappointed and frustrated as we had planned to make Sost by nightfall. However, the strong head winds had decreased our downhill speed from 40-50 kilometres per hour to barely 10 and the broken spoke didn't help.

It is often said that out of adversity comes opportunities and Dih was one of these events. We spent the night on the concrete floor of a very small room and enjoyed the best dahl and chappatis you will find anywhere on the Sub Continent. Our meal was provided by the wildlife officers who were permanently based at Dih and an enjoyable evening was spent chatting while watching them prepare our delicious meal over an open fire.

We were able to learn and discover much from our hosts about life in this very traditional Islamic country. A very pleasant ending to a very tough but very rewarding day.

The next day we were officially stamped into Pakistan. Our lives changed! We were now in an Islamic country and things were different. There were people everywhere but nearly all of them men. Women were there but just not visible. It was also much hotter and the roads were much busier. And there was no cold beer! This was countered, however, with their hospitality and enthusiasm toward us and the fact that both countries played cricket. When they found out we were from Australia they congratulated us on winning the World Cup and at the same time expressed their unhappiness at their own team for letting their country down.

Accusations were plentiful of match fixing and team members betting against themselves. All this of course is academic now being easy to say, but hard to prove. One thing that is clear however is that the Pakistanis are rightfully proud and patriotic and as in most nations the success of the people extends well beyond the individual, its armies or the nations leaders and into the success or non-success in the international sporting arena.

The KKH now wound its way through the Karakoram mountains which boasts the second highest mountain in the world, K2. We cycled through very narrow gorges following first the Khunjerab river, then the Hunza river and finally the mighty Indus as they all twisted their way south. The days were becoming increasingly hotter as we cycled further south.

We didn't see many tourists due to the conflict in nearby Kashmir but we did meet a few other cyclists heading north. This conflict with the Indians had been particularly harsh on the local traders. Instead of peak season prices we often commanded 50% discounts just to get us in the door. This was an unfortunate side effect of war even though we were some 200 kilometres north east of the conflict and in no danger.

Our tents stayed in our panniers as we slept in small inns with comfortable beds for just a few rupees a night. However we did miss the tranquil campsites from the Chinese side and often dreamed of sleeping under canvas again.

After Passau we made an unintentional overnight stop at Gulmit. This very quaint little village was preparing for a festival day the following day, to celebrate Aga Khan's fortieth birthday. We were fortunate enough to acquire accommodation in a traditional style room. This was a single split level room with a pot belly stove in the centre and an octagonal wooden framed skylight which originally would have been a open hole to omit smoke from the wood fire.

That afternoon Peter, Colin and Sean climbed up amongst the hills behind the village accompanied by a group of local boys who were enthusiastically rolling a truck tyre up the hill for the festivities the following night. The idea was to fill the tyre with diesel and at night roll it back down the hill on fire! This practice seemed a bit strange given the number of dry crops and people below but we were sure this was not the first time this had been done and therefore they should know what they were doing!

Once at their highpoint above the village the local boys entertained us with stories of Tigers feasting on cows and Ibis and sang local folk songs which was another special moment never to be forgotten. The next morning we awoke to a village buzzing with activity. The big day had come and everyone was making their way to the Polo ground for the big show. At first we took a back stand view of the proceedings not wishing to interrupt or have a favourable position over local inhabitants as this was their day, not ours. But it was soon explained to us that it was customary for all visitors to have front seats and not wishing to further offend we took up position.

For the next two hours we were entertained with a pipe band and marching, songs performed by a local singer and accompanied by local school girls. Colin, being Scottish, became quite teary as he heard the swirling sound of the bagpipes. We heard prayers and speeches and theatrical performances, which although spoken in Urdu, were easy to understand. But the highlight of the day was a speech given by a young girl from the local girls school. Her confidence at speaking English and visions of the realities of the world were breath taking. None of us had ever heard such an inspiring speech from someone so young. One could not help but see qualities corresponding to those of past Prime Minister Benir Bhutto. If this was an example of the quality of the youth of Pakistan then one could not help but think that a great future lay ahead for this troubled land.

Unfortunately once again time became our enemy and by noon we were on our way down the highway. Just out of Gulmit,

a French and an Australian cyclist on their way north toward China, stopped us for a chat and to swap tales of the road ahead. We had passed about twenty three cyclists on our way south from Kashgar in China and it was always a highlight to chat to others who had a penchant for a different kind of holiday.

The storm hit only twenty kilometres short of our destination, Karimabad. It could have been three hundred but it wouldn't have made any difference. We were soaked and cold and there was no shelter - quite a change from a few minutes earlier when we had been cycling in the heat. We never even had time to put on our waterproofs!

This was just one of the sudden storms which often hit this part of the KKH at this time of year. When we had left Gulmit a few hours before, it had been clear and hot. The rain lasted half an hour but in steep mountainous regions as these, this is all that is needed to dislodge rocks from above and we were not in a position to accelerate out of harms way. This precarious section of the road was now even more dangerous. Chunks of ice and rocks of all sizes littered the road. The gorge was very narrow and stonefall was common. The chunks of ice scared us a little, as they must have tumbled down from a glacier very high above us. Mind you, either the stones or the ice would have done considerable damage to a poor unprotected cyclist.



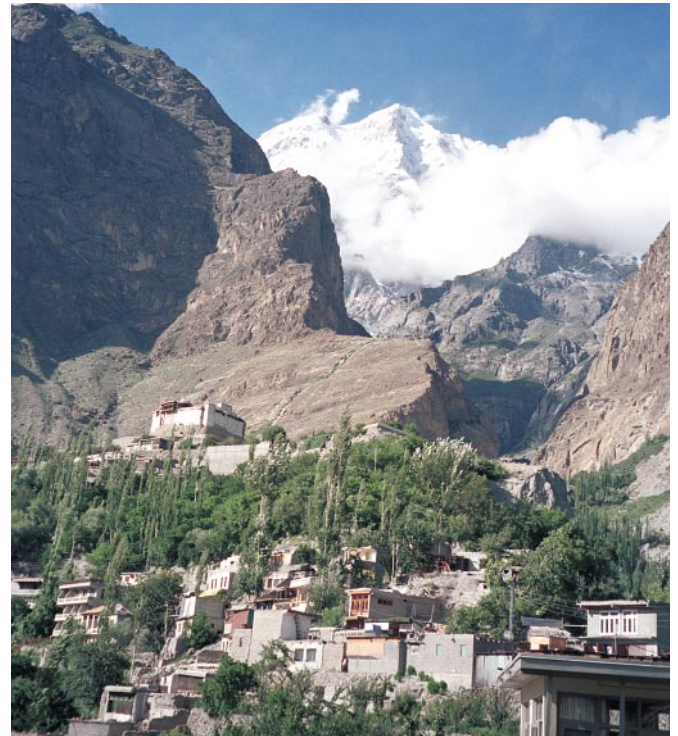
The half hour passed slowly but soon the formidable form of the Baltit fort came into view along with the 300 metre cliff on which it is perched. Below this fort was the town of Karimabad which would leave a lasting impression on us all.

Our first impression of Karimabad came half way up the hill from hell that must be negotiated to reach the township. We stopped to partake in some much needed refreshment when a rock was thrown from the gardens of a hotel above us. This brush with potential disaster initially infuriated us all, but after Sean made a trip to the Hotel manager and getting a less than enthusiastic result we realised that anger would not help the situation and kids will throw stones at foreigners in many countries of the world.

Sean was to later find out during extended travels by himself that often Pakistani youths would throw rocks and be un-chastised by adults that were with them. This was a very frustrating and annoying aspect to cycling in this area but one that we as the traveller had to come to terms with and not the other way round.

Our next impression was by far the best. As we rode over the hill and around the corner the small but plentiful village of Karimabad came into view. Karimabad is about five kilometers above the main highway and it took quite an effort to cycle up the very steep, twisting and narrow road. For the first time since leaving Kashgar we were in a town with plentiful restaurants and fresh food everywhere. A backpacker's delight. This was a great town to stop and relax but as all good travellers do, rest was not really on the agenda.

We were in bottom gear all the way but at one point it became so steep that some of us had to get off and push our bikes. There is only so much tired muscles can cope with! The Hilltop hotel looked inviting and after the usual haggle session we had secured some en suite rooms with some excellent views of the highest peak in the area, Rakaposhi (7790m).





Karimabad to Gilgit

Three nights in Karimabad wasn't quite enough. There are two old forts to visit, the Baltit Fort and the Altit Fort. Although we were very fit by now none of us felt energetic enough to climb up to a meadow above the Baltit Fort to the Ultar glacier.

One morning, Colin, Peter and Sean grouped by accident and walked to the old Altit Fort which they had seen from far below. This trip proved momentarily rewarding. It was a one-hour walk through villages and wheat and rice fields ended with a fine lesson in early Urdu architecture. This strategic position was a magnificent vision of their early defence systems which protected the inhabitants from the marauding hordes. After a leisurely walk back talking to school children and enjoying the fine culture and hospitality, the day was almost gone.

Meanwhile, Lynn, Caron and Ken ventured to the other fort, the Baltit Fort, which is a refurbished Fort situated high above the town of Karimabad. This fort, although not as old as the Altit Fort, had been restored to its former glory and exhibited fine examples of textiles and carpets, for which this area is well known. That afternoon they tantalised their taste buds by sampling Mango milkshakes and other local delights.

By chance the boys teamed up with an American girl and her friend from Lahore for a three hour drive up the Hopper valley. This valley is directly opposite Karimabad and we drove up here for about three hours in a Pakistani-built four wheel drive jeep. Marijuana, the alternative cash crop in these parts,

lined the road. The track was narrow and steep and switch-backed its way up to the road head at the hamlet of Hopper. From here we walked down onto the Bualtar glacier. It's possible to go for longer treks in this area but these are not for the faint hearted.

The Glacier itself was a fine example of the many Glaciers in this region. It dropped from some 20 kilometres away up the valley and creaked and groaned as it slowly made its 300 year march down toward the mighty Indus river. Northern Pakistan is said to be the most glaciated area on earth outside of Antarctica. One look around us, told us this was probably true.



The Aga Khan has quite an influence in this part of the world and we knew it was his fortieth birthday the day we arrived. That night we saw lights high up on the mountain side. They were actually hand held fire torches kept alive with a combination of petrol and sawdust. To our amazement some of the torches began rolling down the hillside. These were the tyres we had seen being rolled up the hill the other night. As the kids had promised, it was part of the celebration to light the rubber and send them careering down the steep slopes. We never really found out where they ended up or if anyone had been in their paths.

We could have stayed here for a few weeks but sadly our old enemy, time, was against us and it was time to leave. However it was now that there was a split in our group. After spending two and a half weeks together the fearless six became the awesome foursome and the dynamic duo. Colin and Peter moved ahead of the rest of us as they planned to ride all the way to Islamabad, a daunting task in the relentless summer sun. A burning desire to cycle the complete distance was driving them to keep moving or was it those secret male business things, ego and Testosterone. Either way the rest of us were content to go much slower and end our journey in Gilgit.



Colin now talks about him and Pete leaving the group and leaving Karimabad.

Gilgit was only 110 kilometres further south and we were in no rush to leave. Breaking a spoke at any time is no fun but when I broke my second of the journey just a few metres downhill I just wanted to stay where I was and not worry about the future. Maybe I wasn't supposed to leave this idyllic spot? I push to bike back up to the hotel and were greeted by the others who thought we had changed our minds.

An hour later the new spoke was in place and we again set off down hill. I was very cautious though, as once one spoke goes others tend to follow. We only had one set of tools for changing spokes and this was left with the others. So I knew I was treading a fine line. The spoke held for most of the journey but the ominous twang of a spoken breaking stopped me just forty kilometres short of Gilgit. I was pissed off but there was nothing I could do. I told Pete to go on and arranged a meeting place in Gilgit. I walked and hitched a few kilometres but no-one picked me up. At one point there were some men sitting beside a small truck and they beckoned me over. I joined them for some sweet milky tea and negotiated a lift into town. I wasn't really in the best position to negotiate but I did so anyway. I managed to get a ride for the princely sum of 18 dollars. A lot of money in that part of the world and not a bad way to earn money but how many broken down crazy cyclists would they see every day?

Once in Gilgit I was in no rush to do anything as Pete would still be a couple of hours in arriving. I stopped and played cricket with some young kids which drew a small crowd. I walked into town and drank some black tea and read a book. Then I checked into the hotel. Two hours later Pete had still not arrived so I went out to wait just like a small dog does when waiting for its master. Four hours later and with darkness descending he eventually arrived, all hot and bothered. He had not known about the shortcut across the Gilgit river and had ridden another twenty

kilometres to cross a bridge lower down. He was knackered and all he wanted to do was eat and then go to sleep. This is what we did.

The next day we slept in before walking around town. We decided to hire a driver and jeep and go up the Naltar Valley for a night. This was one of the twistiest, steepest and narrowest road I had ever seen let alone driven along. The road followed a thrashing, milky river which was tumbling its way down from the glaciers out of sight ahead and above us. We kept wondering what would happen if another vehicle came down the road as there was just nowhere to pass. The road crews were out fixing bits which had collapsed and there were places where you could look out the window straight down several hundred feet. I didn't know what the equivalent of prayers to an atheist were but I was secretly asking for some help from Allah or whoever else was looking after me (if indeed there was someone looking after me).

After a few more queasy moments we arrived at Upper Naltar and checked into our hotel. The valley had opened up and there were pine trees, Alpine meadows, cows and sheep contented grazing and high snow capped peaks soaring above the lower rocky ramparts – a chocolate box picture of a typical Swiss Alpine valley. The dead give-away, however, that it was not in Switzerland but in Pakistan were the liberal marijuana plantations. The temperature was just perfect and a relief from the heat down below. We were just lazing around and soaking in the relaxing atmosphere when we saw crowds of people heading further up the valley. They were going to watch a local polo match for which Pakistan is famous.

Every valley has its polo field and the local competition is fierce. We had no idea how the game operated but we sat and watched, fascinated by the on field antics of the players. Eventually one team won, the game was over and the crowd dispersed as quickly as it had formed.

The descent to Gilgit, the following morning, was just as horrendous as the ascent but we knew when to close our eyes!

Meanwhile as Peter and Colin ventured on, the rest stayed another night in Karimabad not wanting to leave without another delectable meal from the Old Hunza Inn. As we sat outside waiting for dinner the clouds parted and the setting sun shone in all its glory. The view before us was priceless. We had been in cloud for all our stay in Karimabad but as a parting gesture or a lure to get us to return, the daunting peaks of Rakaposhi, Disteghil Sar and in the distance the 8000 metre massif of Nanga ParBhat, shone like high beacons in the sky. This view was deliciously rounded off with cherries and custard for dessert.

Instead of riding in one day to Gilgit Lynn, Stan, Ken and Sean took two days and stopped on the way in a small town called Chalt.

Sean now tells his story.

Chalt was off the main road and a spread out town that had not been heavily involved in the tourist trade and therefore not spoilt by it either. This made it an ideal town for intrepid travellers such as ourselves. We found a camp site in the grounds of an old Government lodging house and were pleased to find that we were the only residents for the night. The ever ready Pakistani hospitality was right at hand and before we knew it, plates of apricots were before us.

This was a time to make some needed repairs as Sean's rear pannier carrier had snapped where it was attached to the back drop bars. Some kiwi ingenuity came into play and before long and with the help of the ever trustworthy Swiss Army knife it was like a new

one. Ken had wandered off during the afternoon and returned later having spent the afternoon talking to a young local scholar. His new friend spoke 5 languages and his knowledge of most things put us all to shame. The frustrating part of travelling is meeting such gifted people who are limited by the environment they find themselves in, through no fault of their own. We would hope that at sometime the right opportunity would come for all these people and that they can enjoy the opportunities we take so much for granted.

The next day the awesome foursome found themselves in Gilgit having taken the longer route south of the town and missing the new 500 foot swing bridge. Peter, you were not alone in adding more kilometres to your belt! This was not before our first experience of theft. As we stopped on the side of the road for lunch, the usual gathering of local, inquisitive residents joined us to chew the fat. However, upon departing we were two toilet shovels lighter. We all felt sad at this point although we suspected some small children, who had been delighted to see us, were responsible. We had not felt threatened in any way before this incident and had not and still don't consider theft to be an issue in this region.

Just as Pete and Colin were arriving back in Gilgit by jeep, the others were also arriving and both groups met outside the hotel where we had agreed to meet. That night we swapped stories over dinner and then had an early night as Colin and Pete planned to leave very very early the next morning.



Gilgit and beyond

While Colin and Pete were on their way the others took a trip up the Astor valley. The cycling part of the journey was now behind them but more adventure was to be had outside and above Gilgit. A half day jeep ride to the south saw them camped on the banks of Rama lake. This lake was formed by the rocks carried down from Nanga ParBhat over hundreds of years and was now stocked with trout so that Sean could finally show his angling skills. But alas, fish was not on the menu again that night.

Before departing this area they journeyed to the far side of the lake to where a summer village was set up for the grazing of livestock. Here, among the stone walls of a primitive village, was the greatest contrast of all. Amongst the barefooted children playing with the small new born animals and their excrement and with their mother churning butter with a churn made from a sheep's skin, were well dressed and educated school boys dancing to a ghetto blaster. Sean had found during the whole trip that most people were not shy of his video cam recorder and in fact he found it hard to capture people in a natural state as they all seemed willing to put on a show for the camera.

Lynn tells the story of their trip to Rama Lake.

Ken, Caron, Sean and I had a few rest days to fill in, and entertained the idea of a side trip to the Astor Valley, about 5 hours drive from Gilgit. After some intensive negotiating with the locals, Sean found a travel company who had a driver with a jeep and who was happy to take us for a reasonable fee. After the bony bike seats we'd been on for the past three weeks, the jeep was modern, comfortable and spacious. Our driver was young and preferred the new wave 'Canto-pop' music to the traditional Pakistani music, which he fed continuously into the cassette player.

Initially the road followed the KKH south, closely following the Buldar Gah river, a slate-grey narrow-bellied snake of a river which ran lazily in the hot morning's sun on its way to meet the Indus further downstream. We passed the turnoff to Fairy Meadows, then doubled back north-east towards the small village of Muthat. As our jeep crawled its way through narrow streets of the village, the very small children hid behind their mothers' skirts while older boys chased us, throwing juicy apricots through the open windows in the hope of "one pen" in return.

We soon left the undulating country side with its yellow and blue meadow flowers and women working in the fields, to begin the steep ascent towards Rama Lake beyond the Rama Gah, a wooded area of thick pines and birch trees at the foot of Nanga Parbat. The road, etched out of an endless cliff-face, seemed to be constantly under repair by local workmen as it climbed its way skyward through the Astor Valley. With scenery reminiscent of the Swiss Alps, pine trees clung precariously to steep ravines which in turn were surrounded by a panorama of snow-clad peaks.

The only signs of life were two women carrying home huge bundles of weeds across their backs for their stock, and some local men sitting on rocks by the roadside, with their picks beside them. Climbing higher, the road became more unstable, and at one point we had to wait until workmen had finished reconstructing the

bridge over a swiftly flowing river. We stood on the roadside while our driver negotiated the wooden bridge. We held our breaths while he crossed the bridge in rally-driver style with only a couple of inches to spare on either side of his wheels.

After several hours we crossed the Muthat Pass (4965m) beyond High Camp on the Chongra Ridge, and reached the small village of Rama. Our final leg of the trip was to follow a dramatic goat-track of a road which wasn't visible at all from my seat. All I could see was a sheer drop down to where grazing black-faced sheep looked like toy farm animals. I'd definitely give up my window seat on the way back! To make matters worse, we had to back up for about 500 yards to let another car pass which was coming the other way, so we perched with our tyres right on the edge while the other vehicle inched past on the inside.

Finally, around the next corner lay the blue shimmering water of Rama Lake. It was tiny - a tranquil, treeless small oasis sporting a lone fisherman, a nomadic village built from grey stones on the far shores of the lake, and - a helipad! As soon as we began to set up camp for the night, a group of children arrived with the headman of the village. He wore coke-bottle thick prescription reading glasses, and his long snow-white beard flowed over his traditional dress of a long shirt, trousers and leather sandals. We readily accepted his invitation to visit the village, Caron and I thankfully remembering to take our head coverings, as was the accepted custom here.

When we had met every inhabitant of the village, the headman's wife invited Caron and I into their home. We bent low to enter the doorway and were invited to sit on the floor, the top carpet being pulled back so that we could sit on the clean 'guests' mat underneath. When our eyes had become accustomed to the gloomy interior we could see that the house was sparsely furnished with only the bare essentials of a rough table, some cooking utensils, cups and plates, and a sleeping area for the family.

Two of the grimy cups were passed to a female relative who returned with them filled with sour milk – a treat for their guests. Here was a dilemma straight from the pages of the Lonely Planet Karakorum Highway Guidebook! Not wanting to offend these generous people, but not wanting a stomach upset in this remote area either, Caron indicated that she had stomach troubles, while I sipped mine without actually drinking anything. We had another dilemma at the end of the visit when another of the women presented us with a gift of yak butter wrapped in what resembled silver birch bark, and tied with string. Earlier, we had watched in amazement at how this butter is made.

The headman's wife had shown us how the milk is poured into the neck of a shorn, scoured sheepskin. The legs had been cut off at about mid thigh and tied, which made handles for the butter churn. The women sat outside in the sun rocking the churn back and forth until the butter formed. The small children showed us their baby lambs while the youths of the village organised family groups for photographs, and sang and danced for us. One of the young men was home on holiday from university in Gilgit and had brought a ghetto-blaster with him. I secretly hoped that for the sake of the village, he had only one set of batteries! Caron showed them postcards of Melbourne and also the Australian coastline which brought gasps of delight.

As we wandered back to our brightly coloured tents, vast array of camping equipment and fancy fuel stoves, it was obvious that our way of life was equally as mystifying to them as theirs was to us. It felt a bit like the circus was in town, and we were the clowns. Compared to the fast-paced, directionless lives of some of the Western World societies, these people appear to me to have the best ringside seats in the world's Big Top.

Unfortunately all great adventures come to an end but one more treat lay ahead for their last day. After Rama Lake another day jeep ride saw them in the

village of Terashing at the foot of the tallest part of Nanga ParBhat. This 8100 metre mountain is called the killer mountain and its shear granite walls do not hide the fact that it will test any who are foolhardy enough to venture near it. After a sunrise that started well before the sun came up in the village and shone as a guiding light, all that remained was to start their journey home.

Meanwhile, Colin and Peter were still cycling on. The heat was unbearable and the sweat was evaporating faster than it could drip down their faces. It was well above forty five degrees Celsius. The heat seemed trapped in the valley and the rocks absorbed and then reflected this radiant heat until there was nowhere to hide. In other words it was like an oven. When a truck or a bus passed us, this oven became fan forced. The water in our bottles was hot – so hot it was almost undrinkable. It certainly didn't quench our insatiable thirst. And to top it off we had a headwind. They wondered if Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan or Marco Polo had the same problem?

They only had five hundred and fifty kilometres to go and just five days to do it in. The guidebook mentioned that it was seriously hot south of Gilgit, By this stage of the journey they were fit and ready for anything. Except for one thing. They had seriously underrated the temperatures in July!

Colin again tells his story.

It was about 4pm on that fateful day having cycled just over a hundred kilometres and we estimated we only had twenty or so left to Chilas. The heat had already taken its toll. The sun sunk behind the mountains at an agonisingly slow pace, it was still oven hot and we were cruising on auto pilot when Pete got a puncture. We dug deep, found some energy and both shared the task of fixing it. The first new tube blew up and then the second one went down after we were ready to move on. Was this the beginning of the end? We gave up, waved down a truck and hitched a lift the few remaining kilometres into town.

That evening we worked out a number of different options such as cycling at night or taking a bus part of the way and cycling other sections. In the end we decided to take a bus all the way to Rawalpindi and then to cycle the sixty kilometres of steep winding road up to the old British hill station of Murree”.

The cycle up to Muree was a change from the rest of the cycling. Although rather humid it was misty and relatively cool. But the cycle up and down must rank as one of the most dangerous cycling trips of their travelling lives. There were seemingly suicidal truckies, manic bus drivers and insane car drivers all overtaking each other on blind corners. Drivers going uphill played chicken with those speeding downhill while all of them didn't spare any thought for us, two stupid foreign cyclists.

Muree was an ideal place to escape the heat. They just sat and watched the world go and occasionally wandered along the forested ridges. This relaxing time however was tempered with the thought of the return downhill ride.

Unfortunately as they started their downhill cruise, a car 'took out' Pete and here it is in his words.

Two days ago we toiled up the hill to Muree, now the day has arrived to hoon back down. Yes at our age, hooning is still permissible! I'll show the local Pakistani's how to treat a bit of bitumen, even with only two wheels. I've just ridden a million kilometres; well it felt like it, so I was ready for them.

Col said we should take it easy because of their apparent absolute disregard for road rules, but I knew better. If we go flat out and keep in front, they'll never catch us. Col felt there were some flaws in my hypothesis, so, as any Leo (apparently Leo's are like this) would do, I had a point to prove. Well, with the panniers packed and the helmet neatly packed away, (who needs a helmet in an apparent road lawless land?) I was off.



My trusty bike and me were going to be king of the Muree hill. I could picture the headlines. Well I could see them because I wouldn't be able to read the Arabic script! Elderly Aussie bike rider smashes the time from Muree to Islamabad. I'd become a national hero. They would declare Muree to Islamabad day. Bigger than the Aga Khan's birthday. I was going to be famous. But like all kings, they are eventually knocked off their throne. In my case my bike. Yes, it only took two minutes in to my record-breaking dream for a motorist to take me out. As I lay on the road and looked back at my twisted metal friend under the car, I could hear that reassuring sound of 'you OK mate'. There was Col, bending down to pick up his shattered friend. Not in body but ego! If my bike could talk about my attempt it would probably kindly say, you @<(>"{!^+;>#^*. Luckily it can't talk!*

This is not the end of our journey, just another day closer to its continuation.



The cyclists



Lynn Craig. Lynn left New Zealand at the tender age of 20 in 1975 on her first big overseas trip to Europe where she worked as a Staff Nurse in England. Fully intending to return home, Lynn, now 45, is still making her way back to NZ, having stopped en route at Papua New Guinea,

Brisbane and finally Melbourne in 1988, where she has lived ever since. Lynn had a change of career seven years ago, and is now a librarian at The University of Melbourne's Baillieu Library. The cycling trip from China into Pakistan was a great personal challenge for Lynn, and she strongly believes that she made it to the final destination of Gilgit in Pakistan mainly because of her stubborn determination and willpower. Being able to share this wonderful experience with lifelong friends made the trip even more enjoyable. Over the years, Lynn has also had the good fortune to experience travel in Africa, America, Nepal, the Caribbean Islands, and the South Pacific, and is currently planning a 2 month trip to South America at the end of 2001.

The cyclists



Colin Hood. Colin was born and raised in Scotland and has lived in Australia since 1985. He started his working life managing supermarkets in and around Edinburgh. However after seven years of this he realised there was much more to life than working so he took off back-

packing around the world. Two years later he returned home penniless and took on a job as expedition leader/driver of 13 week overland expeditions from London to Kathmandu. In between layovers in Kathmandu he led treks into the Himalayas to such places as Everest Base camp and Annapurna Sanctuary. Three years later he and a friend spent a year cycling 17,000 km from Edinburgh to Sydney. He has travelled the Trans Mongolian train from Beijing to Helsinki as well as by train from Beijing to Urumqi and Kunming to Hanoi. He has climbed in the NZ Alps and also in the European Alps including an ascent of Mt Blanc. Over twenty years in the travel industry hasn't dulled his sense of adventure and in July 2001 he is off to climb Mustagh Ata, an 'easy' 7500m peak in the Pamir mountains of China.

The cyclists



Sean Moroney. Sean was born and raised in New Zealand but moved to Australia in 1980. After 2 years of working in the mining industry his travelling started in earnest. After accomplishing a long term ambition of trekking to Mount Everest, Sean spent a further 5 months in Nepal

and has returned many times since. He has accumulated four years of travel experience throughout Asia and South America. His thirst for remote mountains has taken him to some of the most harshest and beautiful places outside of Antarctica. Sean will also join Colin and Peter on Mustagh Ata in July 2001, but not before cycling across Tibet. He will then continue on to Argentina to hopefully summit Aconcagua, the tallest mountain in the Americas. This trip was the first that he had completed using a bicycle as the main source of transport. Although he completed a total of 1500 kilometres on this journey he vowed at the end never to cycle again but 2 years later he plans to cycle across Tibet. Upon reflection, he found that many of the great experiences that we encountered on this journey were due to cycling and being very much in touch with the environment that we were in. People were not afraid to approach us and we had the time and interest to stop and communicate which is an integral part of any enjoyable travel experience.

The cyclists



Peter Pill. Peter was a late starter on the travel scene. His first taste of travel, like most Australians, was when he travelled to Bali back in 1976. Since then, Asian countries have been popular in Peter's travel destinations. The desire to explore other Asian and sub continent countries,

the lure of a myriad of cultures and the challenge of adventure was the perfect recipe for the type of holiday offered by the Karakorum Highway bike ride.

Peter has spent time in the mountains of New Zealand, India, Pakistan, China and Nepal either trekking or climbing. However, he also puts time aside to laze on the beaches of Thailand's islands or to backpack through Europe. The friendships which Peter has formed during these trips will last a lifetime because of the hardship and emotions shared with his travelling companions. Stories such as the KKH bike ride can be retold an infinite number of times (sometimes a tad embellished) and never lose their entertaining value.

The cyclists



Caron Stanley. When we did the ride Caron (sometimes known as Stan) was 38 years old and had never contemplated anything like this before. She had travelled around a bit before through Europe, Canada and some of Asia. She thought she had been roughing it staying in

Youth Hostels and cheap motels but now she really knows what roughing it is all about. When Colin and Peter told her about the holiday they were planning she remembers saying that it sounded great (you know how you do when you want to be polite). Then they suggested that she could come along and she was immediately interested but had some reservations as to whether she could physically and mentally handle it. She knew she would be in good company and she trusted that they knew what they were doing. So she finally made her decision on New Year's Eve 1998 and began her training, as much as you can do when you are busy with work and have a fairly hectic social life.

The highlight for Caron was everything. The people with their kind faces, the weather beaten happy children not the mention the spectacular scenery every inch of the way. She also mentioned the local food. (Not that she wanted to know how they made it or what was in it but it tasted pretty good). She considers herself very fortunate to have been on such a great holiday. To attempt it in the first place and to have experienced so much is a great achievement.

The cyclists



Ken Young. Ken spent his early years in the country town of Maryborough, Central Victoria, where he learned first and foremost, how to look after himself and others in the harsh Australian bush, and the dying art of genuine Aussie mateship. At 15, he made for the city of

Melbourne, first working for the Victorian Railways, and later at several other occupations mostly in sales. Ken now works at The University of Melbourne in the Education Resource Library. As this was to be Ken's first major overseas trip, he enthusiastically spent any spare time in outdoor stores collecting every piece of camping equipment known to man, and became affectionately known thereafter as 'Mr Gadget'. On several occasions however, he did manage to produce the appropriate piece of equipment such as the infamous red funnel and Chinese women's stockings.....but more on that later! Personally, Ken enjoyed immensely the cultural experience of spending time with the locals along the 850 kms he rode of the KKH, and hopes to return to Pakistan sometime in the future. In November, 2001 he will visit Peru, Bolivia, Venezuela and Equador in South America

Epilogue

Colin Sean and Peter went back to attempt Mustagh Ata and made it to Camp I at 5600 metres. The mountain was much more than what it had appeared from their bikes.

Sean married Maria just before leaving for Mustagh Ata. Stan met Peter, quit work and moved out of Melbourne for the more sedate life in Ararat.

Peter bought his house in Kensington with Robbie. Colin will be looking after Ken and Lynn's house and will move into his new place sometime in the New Year. He has no other big trips planned but will visit New Zealand later in the year.

Lynn and Ken departed for their 'Around the World' trip on Friday 2 November, first stop Easter Island. Then onto Chile, Peru, Ecuador, USA, UK and Turkey. They will have a day in Hong Kong on the way home to shop for our duty free requirements and any last minute presents.

We found the mountains of the Pamirs and Karakoram equal to any in the world and like any mountain range to possess their own unique qualities. From the tall peak of K2 to the massive Rupal wall on Nanga Parbat, Pakistan captured his imagination and his sense of adventure. We can not recommend highly enough to anyone, that travelling in Northern Pakistan and China is one of the most rewarding experiences you can find.

We would all like to thank each other for the companionship and understanding which made this journey one of the best any of us has ever done. Although it is now a memory we still talk

about it often. For six people to get on so well is a testament to the character and personalities of us all. We wish each other safe and happy travelling in the future and we know that we will always remain friends.

'If the water in a pool is not moving, it becomes stagnant and muddy, but if it stirs and flows, it becomes clear again; the same is true of a person on a journey.'

Muhammed Asad, *Le Chemin de la Mecque* (Fayard)

