

## Pakistan Reflections – July 2023

For decades – ever since reading Galen Rowell’s book about the “Throne Room of the Mountain Gods” – I’ve dreamed of trekking to Concordia in the Karakorum range, home to many of the world’s highest peaks, including the massive, 28,251’ K2. Over many years, I read myriad books on the mountaineering history of the area: from the Duke of Abruzzi’s early explorations to the Italian first ascent of K2, Messner’s alpine-style ascent of Broad Peak, big-wall climbs on Great Trango Tower, the tragic death of Herman Buhl on Choglosia and many more. We had a trip scheduled in 2020, but the Covid pandemic forced cancelation. Finally, this month, we made it! We had a wonderful group: Margaret & me, our sons Adam & Galen & their partners Jac & Becca.



*Porters on the rocky glacier with K2 behind.*



*Amazing hospitality from a stranger’s family in Skardu.*

back road, we were dazzled by hospitality - invited into a family’s house for tea, fruit, and cakes “You mustn’t leave until all the food is gone!” Insisted our impromptu host as more dishes kept appearing. Later, during the six-hour jeep ride to the road-end village of Askole, it seemed like every one of the hundreds of people we passed on the road waved and greeted us with large smiles (men) or shy, curious ones (women and children).

*Invited by a teacher to tour school classrooms in Skardu.*

The mountain

scenery certainly matched my (exceedingly high) expectations, but there were many surprises as well. For one, people were much more friendly than expected. Even in our first day in Islamabad, *dozens* of people came up, introduced themselves, wanting to hear where we were from, and to take selfies with us. Then, in the small, gateway city of Skardu, while strolling a





*A girl in the medieval town of Askole, our trailhead.*

Given that the trekking portion of our trip was sixteen days through an uninhabited wilderness of rock and glaciers, we had what seemed like a crazily large support staff: a wonderful guide (Murtaza), 4 cook staff, two horses with attendants, and 14 porters! Our amazing cook, Fida, had purchased most of our food from Skardu, but we bought four chickens and a goat (Lily) in Askole. Sweet Lily walked with us for the first four days of hot trudging, but when we reached the glacier and temperatures dropped, sadly, she was quietly butchered.

*Women working in Askole's irrigated fields.*

Pakistan is more than 96% Muslim, and people wore conservative clothing with all non-tourist women in hijab. Even tourist restaurants are dry, and so there seemed to be no problems with alcoholism, drug use, and almost no homelessness. Boys and girls are schooled separately, but while walking in Skardu, a teacher, spying us outside on the street, invited us in for a classroom tour.

Our trek started in the seemingly medieval village of Askole – a warren of narrow, stone alleyways connecting dirty dwellings where people and animals lived together. The rugged countryside was unbelievably arid, but irrigation enabled terraced fields where women and children worked until well after sunset.







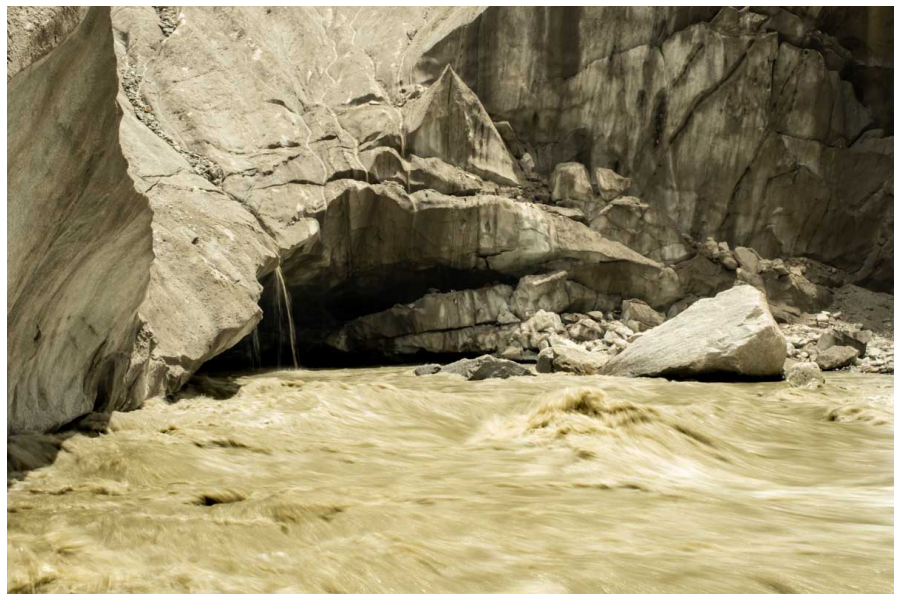
*Porters near the trek's beginning, above the arid Braldu river*

The hiking was difficult for several reasons: 1) temperature (too hot then too cold), 2) altitude (we started at 10,000' and climbed to nearly 16k), and 3) very rough ground (loose rocks & scree). But it was amazingly and starkly beautiful. For the first two and a half days we ascended the Braldu and Baltoro river valleys, baked by high-altitude sun. Above us rose massive and dusty rock cliffs, while we looked down on the violent river churning brown with glacial silt from the outwash of huge glaciers ahead.

The crowds surprised us. While we were in a remote, glaciated wilderness tens of miles from the nearest habitation, our route has become incredibly popular, by far the most traveled in Pakistan. Alas, campsites were crowded with trash and offal scattered everywhere. Donkeys roamed free and I often startled the beasts during my nocturnal pee. On the

plus side, each group tended to follow the same itinerary, so we stayed in sync with the same set of people day after day, such as a friendly New Zealand party, who enjoyed exercising on Becca's climbing hang board. There was also a higher ratio of expeditions to trekkers than I expected with many people aspiring to summit K2, Broad Peak, or scale new routes on less trafficked mountains.

On the third day we reached the snout of the Baltoro glacier, a huge cliff of ice from which the roaring meltwater river emerged. An hour of hiking brought us to the top, covered with sand, rocks and rubble. Most of the next 9 days was spent clambering over this ever-changing surface, skirting crevasses, bypassing glacial lakes, and finding snow bridges over ice-



*The Baltoro river emerges in a torrent from under a 300' cliff of dirty, brown glacial ice.*



*High on the glacier, meltwater rivers carved deep canyons with icy walls.*

bound rivers which rushed menacingly through slippery canyon walls (it would have been 'very bad' to have slipped into the water!).

Our staff were fantastic, with wake-up coffee, breakfast, hot lunch to break up the day's hike, tea and snacks after arrival at camp, and a fantastic dinner each night. Each day they baked fresh chapati, which was especially delicious when hot off the griddle. Margaret and I celebrated our 34<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary mid-

trip, which inspired the porters to harvest a small bouquet of flowers from the cliffs bordering the glacier. Meanwhile Fida somehow baked us a delicious cake (without an oven, of course)! Usually, we dined in a comfy mess tent (lugged by the porters) but on a few occasions, we huddled with the cook staff in their cooking tent, warmed by their heavy gas stoves. For sleeping, we had spacious Pakistani imitation VE-25-style dome tents, pads and warm sleeping bags. The porters, on the other hand, packed into crude rock shelters, which they covered with a low tarp to keep off rain and snow. A few days into the trip, one of the cooking staff started talking about having a *concert* to



*Concordia campsite after a night-time snowstorm.*

celebrate our eventual arrival at Concordia (a dramatic convergence of glaciers that would provide our first views of K2). I must admit that it sounded a bit like a hokey tourist performance, but he seemed pretty into the idea. I knew that Pakistan was composed of many tribal regions with an astounding 68 indigenous languages! Indeed, the porters in



*Fida, our cook, working his magic.*





*High spirits during an impromptu concert*

our group had come from different towns, speaking three different native tongues. Since each town had its own set of sounds, I realized how fun it would be to hear the variety. Meanwhile, the kids (who had really reached out and gotten to know each of the porters) were working hard on the idea. Becca, an accomplished a

cappella singer, was definitely psyched, and started writing down lyrics to several songs from memory. When the moment arrived, it exceeded all expectations! Beginning with a small group in our mess tent, the singing attracted a crowd of porters from other groups, who swarmed our camp, banging on the fabric walls, insisting to come in and join the festivities. Soon there were way too many to fit, and the concert expanded. Instruments appeared: an old jerry can, now empty of gasoline. The mood was contagious and truly magical. Best of all, we had several more concerts on subsequent afternoons, each bring a crowd with new songs and more celebration.

Another ritual started early in the trip when someone discovered that Margaret was a doctor.

Each afternoon a crowd of up to 30 patients appeared near our tents, consisting of both porters and trekkers in need of advice (and also in need of Margaret's extra medicines, which she had fortuitously packed). Diarrhea was an all-too-common problem (indeed, we all got



*Morning light on the Baltoro Glacier*

it), but the porters had a range of ailments. Indeed, it became clear that many of the porters had never seen a doctor in their lives – not a surprise when the nearest clinic is 6 hours of expensive jeep ride from their village, along a harrowing road that's closed in winter.

Knees were the trip's big disappointment. Mine, which had been replaced 18 months previously, and Margaret's, which had been plaguing her since an accidental fracture in Utah, years before. Mine acted up on the *first* day of trekking, delivering debilitating pain, despite the easy terrain. It was heartbreaking to think I'd have to abandon my dream trip right at the beginning. Luckily, with the family's amazing support, I managed to limp through to Concordia. But we had to drop our plan to climb 19,000' Gondorogo Peak and exit via the Hushe valley – instead returning the way we had started. While missing the summit and new scenery was disappointing, the return trip was as exceptionally beautiful as on the way in.



*Clockwise from bottom: Dan, Galen, Becca, Margaret, Murtaza (our guide), Adam, and Jaclyn.*

In summary – it was a stunning adventure with incredible scenery but even more amazing people! **More photos at** <http://bit.ly/44uicpR>



*Sunset view from 'Goro 2' campsite. The ice towers in foreground are ~50 feet high – chunks of distant ice cliffs that fell onto the rubbly glacier years ago, many miles up valley, now slowly drifting south and gradually melting.*