

## The Telegraph

### The royal visit to Pakistan will help to finally put it on the tourist map

- [Jonny Bealby](#), FOUNDER OF WILD FRONTIERS

13 OCTOBER 2019 • 12:00PM

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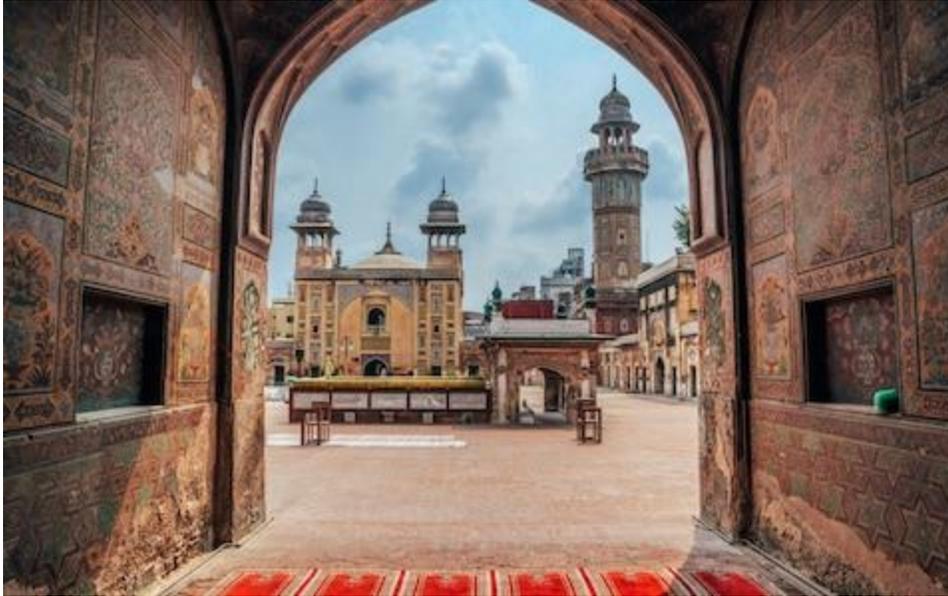
When I read in July that the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge were due to visit Pakistan, on a four-day royal tour that begins on Monday, I nearly fell off my chair. For years Britain's Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) has listed Pakistan as a place British travellers should only visit if absolutely necessary and, once there, take all manner of precautions and avoid most places. Yet here were members of our Royal family travelling to the country that most sportsmen, politicians and travel companies avoid.

Why? Because things are finally changing.

When I first visited Pakistan in 1996, I was on a quest to follow in the footsteps of my two heroes from literature, Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot from – ironically, in the circumstances – Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Man Who Would Be King". I trekked through India, across Pakistan and deep into the Afghan Hindu Kush, a journey that gave rise to my book *For a Pagan Song* and my travel company, Wild Frontiers.

In the early Nineties, tourism in Pakistan was flourishing. With adventure travel hitting its stride, most of the well-established operators – Explore, Exodus and Intrepid – ran trips there. Indeed, tour groups came from all over the world to trek among some of the world's highest mountains, to raft its glorious rivers, to marvel at the epic landscapes and learn more about the people. With visas easily obtained through the High Commission in New Delhi, backpackers crossed the border and ventured north.

The first sign of trouble came in 1998 when the then nascent terror group al-Qaeda blew up the US embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi, prompting US president Bill Clinton to fire cruise missiles at terrorist training camps inside Afghanistan. The FCO released advice warning against travel along the frontier and tourist numbers started to decrease.



Pakistan is full of natural wonders and exciting cities CREDIT: GETTY

Despite this, tourism continued. By 2000, I was running five groups a year for Wild Frontiers, and I was asked to lead tours for other UK companies. Then the world changed.

I was in northern Pakistan with a group of British tourists when 9/11 happened. So cut off were we, in the valleys of Hindu Kush, that we didn't hear about the catastrophic events in New York until three days later. In the aftermath, tourism in Pakistan died completely. Even a brief renaissance in 2004, helped by the groundbreaking Himalaya with Michael Palin series, didn't last long.

In 2007, the Swat Valley, a tourist favourite in the early Nineties, was taken over the Pakistan Taliban. In 2008 the Marriott Hotel in the capital was bombed, killing more than 50 people. Then something happened that again changed everything. When the army school in Peshawar was attacked by militants in November 2014, killing 149, most of them children, the country was galvanised. The army, the government and the people seemed to rise as one in condemnation; the violence had gone too far, and it was time to change.

Travelling out there the following year, and again two years later, it was obvious to me that there was a desire to move on from the violent past. After a huge operation the army took control of the Tribal Areas, bringing them under federal control; many militant groups were outlawed or shut down; and security along the frontier was increased. In 2015 the FCO lifted its advice against travel to large parts of the north, though warnings remain in place for the former Tribal Areas, Peshawar and some other destinations (see [gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/pakistan](http://gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/pakistan)).

In August 2018 Imran Khan was sworn in as prime minister, vowing to increase international tourist numbers, and regulations were eased. This June British Airways was the first European airline to recommence flights to Islamabad.

As a result, tourist numbers are again increasing. Wild Frontiers has seen 100 per cent growth for each of the past four years and some bigger companies are starting to trickle back in. The Cambridges' visit can only help. It's my hope that Pakistan, a country I love, has turned a corner and is ready to take its rightful place among the world's great adventure destinations.

*Would you be tempted by a holiday to Pakistan? Comment below to join the conversation.*

**The Financial Times**

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8 November 2019

**Festivals and new airline routes put these destinations on the map**



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### **Pakistan**

LONDON: Could 2020 be Pakistan's year? A new e-visa scheme was launched in March and British Airways resumed flights to Islamabad in June. Meanwhile visits to the country's cultural sites rose more than threefold between 2014 and 2018.

STA travel, the world's largest travel company for students and young people, reported a 91 per cent increase in travellers this year compared with last, and adventure tour operator Wild Frontiers has recorded 40 per cent more bookings.

<https://www.ft.com/content/7964db7a-ff18-11e9-a530-16c6c29e70ca>

November 09 2019

## The Telegraph

### In search of the real Pakistan – what I learnt on a trip to this fascinating country



"We'd spend hours on rough dusty roads that rattled your brain and then, rounding a corner, a vista would yawn into view that ripped your heart open" CREDIT: GETTY

- [Emma Thomson](#)

14 OCTOBER 2019 • 10:15AM

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As the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge embark on a royal tour of Pakistan, Emma Thomson recounts a recent trip to the country

Terrorism, the Taliban, Osama bin Laden. We've all heard bad things that make us wary of travelling to Pakistan, but this paints an incomplete and distorted picture.

Few remember that this same country was built on Buddhism and influenced by mirs (kings), shamans and even fairies.

That it's a place where pagan tribes still prosper; where marijuana grows wild and common as daisies; where, in cities such as Islamabad and Lahore, women regularly forgo the hijab or headscarf; and where every part of a truck serves as a seat – even the bumper.

When it comes to Pakistan we need to be wary of our preconceptions.

“All that you hear is not all that is happening,” reasoned Maqsood Ul Mulk, as we lay on the green lawn of his beloved rose garden overlooking the town of Ayun, just 10 miles from the Afghan border.

Descended from a line of Chitral princes – some say even the grandson of Conqueror Tamerlane himself – he’s worked with everyone, from the BBC Planet Earth team and Michael Palin to novelist William Dalrymple.



Tirich Mir, seen from Chitral mosque CREDIT: GETTY

“You have to see the reality on the ground for yourself. People need to make their own decisions about the world, not just be told by the Foreign Office.”

It’s sage advice. I’d joined Wild Frontier’s Hindu Kush Adventure – voted as one of the ‘Top 50 Trips of a Lifetime’ by National Geographic – and in doing so contravened four out of nine ‘against all’ and ‘all but essential’ travel warnings issued by the FCO.

It meant I’d had to fork out for specialist travel insurance because regular policies become null and void when you flout FCO advice. But sat in Maqsood’s perfumed garden any doubts were dwarfed by the 7,708-metre icy elegance of Tirich Mir – the highest mountain of the Hindu Kush – dressed in a petticoat of wispy white cloud.

But why is the risk worth taking now? After all, the day before I travelled a bomb had exploded outside a shrine in central Lahore and the day after armed militants had attacked a hotel in Gwadar in the far south. Reminders that all is not calm here.



Shah Faisal Mosque in Islamabad. It's claimed the CIA believed real rockets were concealed inside the four minarets CREDIT: GETTY

Nevertheless, a series of events have conspired to kick-start real change in the country. In 2014, the Taliban attacked a public army school in Peshawar, killing 149 and abruptly ending the Pakistani Army's tendency to turn a blind eye to its activities. In August 2018, cricket legend Imran Khan was elected Prime Minister and in addition to cracking down on corruption, he has opened the country up with a new e-visa system, making entry much simpler and faster. And in June – after an 11-year hiatus – British Airways relaunched its direct London–Islamabad route.

So in a convoy of 1970s Jeeps our group of 12 had left the calm streets of Islamabad and journeyed north, passing first through the alpine Swat Valley.



### Baltit Fort CREDIT: GETTY

“This place was off limits even to me until 2009,” said our guide, Attaulah Khan, referring to previous Taliban activity. We paused in the town of Mingaora and wandered the local market. Eyes watched us surreptitiously as we weaved between the crush of shoppers, past shops flogging rifles and butcher stalls displaying sheeps’ heads and hoofs, stood up like trophies. A chicken seller halted, cleaver aloft. “Welcome to Pakistan! We’re so happy to see you!” he beamed, surrounded by his gangly white animals and the fusty smell of bird faeces.

Onward, to visit Maqsood in Ayun and then up and over the 3,800-metre Shandur Pass, home to the highest polo field in the world and a lake as blue as lapis lazuli. In July, it’s a crowded festival of polo players and their fans, but we were utterly alone with the fluffy black yaks munching on the mossy grass and clumps of delicate pink flowers that popped against the amphitheatre of snowy slopes.

We’d spend hours on rough dusty roads that rattled your brain and then, rounding a corner, a vista would yawn into view that ripped your heart open – deep valleys whose only steadfast companion over the centuries was the broiling azure river that carved them.



The view towards Rakaposhi CREDIT: GETTY

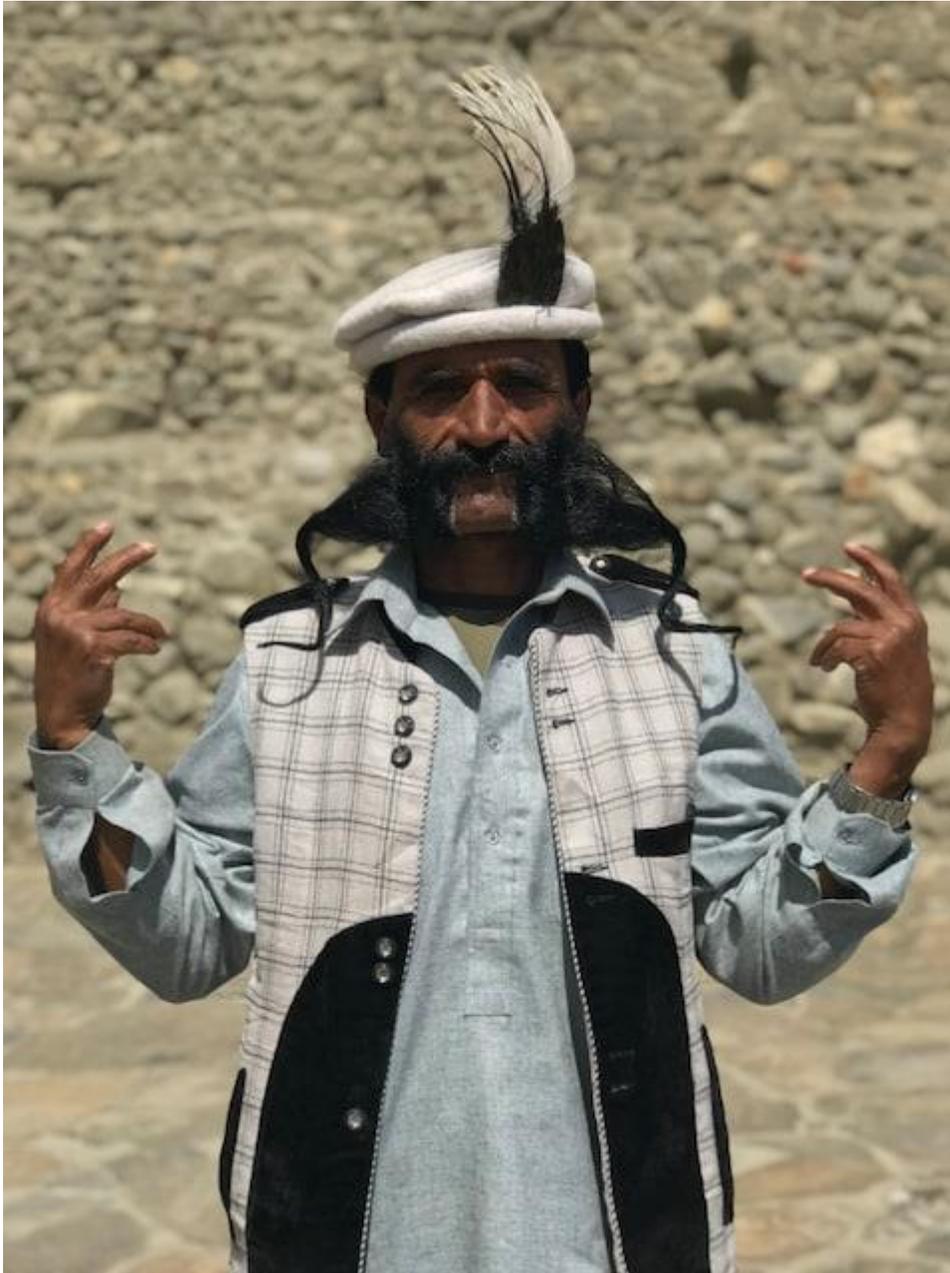
Crossing into Gilgit-Baltistan, we wended toward the Hunza Valley – Attaulah’s birthplace and bordering Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor. Famed for its hardiness, this independent princely state bore a bow and arrow on its flag until 1974 and was cut off from the outside world until the completion of the Karakoram Highway in 1978. But Attaulah had sweeter things on his mind. “We’re famous for our 32 varieties of apricots – God created one type for each tooth!” he laughed.

But I was barely listening. As the Jeeps strained like packhorses up the sharp twist of streets, a great cauldron of eight mountains was swallowing us. Attaulah reeled off the names of the peaks as easily as if they were his sisters. Queen among them is Rakaposhi, with the highest unbroken slope on Earth (it rises 19,357 feet in just seven horizontal miles). We stayed at Eagle’s Nest, the highest hotel in the valley, and as night fell I watched from my balcony as the darkening mountains coiled around the river like a dragon, blocking out the sun with their ridged back.

Dawn revealed a wreath of lingering mist in the valley. Attaulah pointed to a structure perched on a plateau of ancient glacial moraine far below us. The former residence of the Hunza mirs (kings), Baltit Fort is more than 700 years old and modelled on Tibet’s Potala Palace because the princess he married brought artisans from her home in Baltistan – nicknamed Little Tibet by the Moghuls – as part of her dowry. We started hiking down toward it.

“Tourists don’t know about this trail – you need a local like me,” said Attaulah, leading us past boulders of schist, green like unpolished emeralds, and bushes of buttercup-gold laburnum. Occasionally, the breeze from below whipped up wafts of wild sage.

The last king only moved out in 1945. Instead, upon reaching the fort, I meet Salahuddin, a man of 70 with a metre-long moustache he curls around his ears to keep out the way. “I haven’t cut it in 22 years,” he said, stroking the ebony hair that glistened with apricot oil.



Salahuddin, a man of 70 with a metre-long moustache he curls around his ears CREDIT: EMMA THOMSON

At sunset, we climbed to a 3,000-metre viewpoint. Up here the air was thinner, making even the improbable seem possible. “Fairies live up there, near the juniper trees,” said Attaulah, pointing. “Children born to fairies are ugly, so they sneak down and swap them for good-looking human children and those children grow up to be shamans,” he continued, deadpan. “They’re drawn to the sound of the flute and drums, have eyes blue as Attabad Lake and golden light hair.” He trailed off, eyes glued to the rocky slopes. This was not the Pakistan I had expected.

We sat in silence watching the sun gild the mountaintops. With 108 peaks over 23,000ft (7,000m) – more than Nepal and China combined – there are rumours Pakistan will be promoted as ‘the new Nepal.’ Maqsood doesn’t agree. “Only when you can visit all areas can you compare us to Nepal.”

But bloggers and Instagrammers have already been invited in to document their carefree adventures, perhaps sending the wrong message. Pakistan is not a destination for young single travellers to be exploring without taking precautions.

“I’ve worked with a pair of bloggers and they inadvertently caused great offence because they weren’t aware of local customs,” explains Maqsood. He recommends still using a tour operator.



Kalasha girls in Chitral CREDIT: GETTY

“It’s more expensive, but they give you advice on how to behave which is invaluable. You have to remember areas like Swat and Peshawar haven’t seen

tourists for 20 years – it’s a different generation and they’re curious. It’s the people you have to meet to know the real Pakistan.” Both tourists and locals are learning a new balance and it’s important to get it right to set the tone for years to come.

As Pakistan’s beloved national poet, Allama Iqbal, so eloquently put it in *The Painful Wail*: ‘How can beauty unveil itself if no-one is anxious for sight. Lighting of the candle is meaningless if there is no assembly.’ So assemble we must, travellers.

### Pakistan essentials

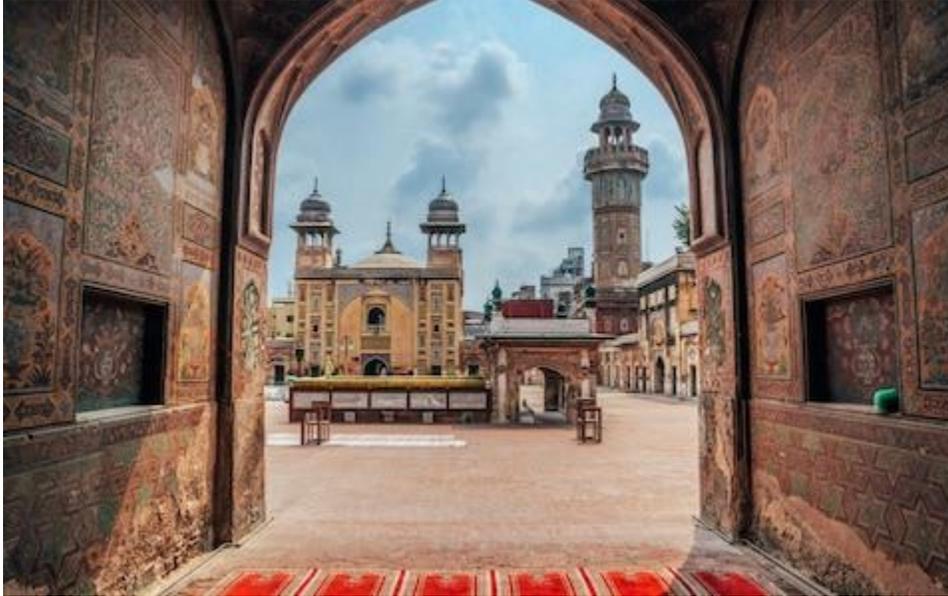
Emma Thomson travelled on Wild Frontiers’ (020 8741 7390; [wildfrontierstravel.com](http://wildfrontierstravel.com)), who offer both tailor-made and small group tours to Pakistan. Their 16-day Hindu Kush Adventure costs £2,795 per person, excluding flights and visas.

The new e-visa (<https://visa.nadra.gov.pk/e-visa/>) has cut application waiting time from six weeks to one. A single-entry tourist visa valid for three months costs US\$60.

British Airways (0844 493 0747; [ba.com](http://ba.com)) flies direct from Heathrow to Islamabad three times per week.

## The Telegraph

### Would you take the kids on holiday to Pakistan?



"We have had wonderful family weekends in Karachi, Peshawar, and Lahore (pictured), and have not felt threatened anywhere" CREDIT: GETTY

- [Ben Farmer](#)

8 JULY 2019 • 10:50AM

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Weaving up a giddy mountain track on horseback towards one of the world's highest peaks last month, I could only reflect on how much this year's family holiday was every bit as different as we had hoped.

With a frothing river thundering at the bottom of a vertiginous gorge on one side and alpine forest on the other, we were a long way from our usual fare of a kids' club belting out 'Baby Shark'.

For several years after the arrival of our daughter, holidays had become stuck in a comfortable rut. We chose a resort in the Med or the Far East, complete with disco and water slides, and spent 10 days pleasantly lazing.

Yet the memory of more varied pre-baby holidays kept nagging and a new posting to Islamabad to cover the region for The Telegraph this summer gave the opportunity for something different.

Pakistan may not yet spring to mind as an obvious family holiday destination, with a reputation that is more Homeland than The Travel Show. Yet many in the country argue, with some justification, that such a portrayal is unfair. The militant violence which blighted the country earlier in the decade has fallen dramatically following military security campaigns, and the country is raring to regain its standing as a jewel in the world of exotic and adventurous travel. The wider world is staring to take notice. British Airways last month resumed direct flights after a hiatus of 11 years. Planes currently leave three days a week, but that is expected to become more frequent. The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge are due to visit in the autumn.

As a foreign correspondent I often have to write about the grimmer things going on in a country, but like anywhere there is more to Pakistan than doom and gloom. Since arriving, we have had wonderful family weekends at the seaside in Karachi, exploring the bazaar in Peshawar, or sampling the art galleries and old city of Lahore. We have not felt threatened anywhere and have only found hospitality and curiosity. The procession of people who want to greet our daughter, pinch her cheeks and take a selfie can at times be almost overwhelming.



The seaside in Karachi CREDIT: GETTY

For our summer holiday, as the temperatures nudged 110F (43C) in Islamabad, we had decided to escape the heat to what is for many, the country's finest attraction: the spectacular northern highlands.

The confluence of the Himalayan, Karakoram and Hindu Kush ranges bless the region with some of the most stunning mountainscapes and trekking in the world. Throw in the local passion for fast and furious polo, dramatic hill forts and diverse local cultures and you have quite a package.

“We have everything, but the problem is that we have been titled as a terrorist country,” said Irfanullah Baig of Waljis Travel, which arranged our trip. One of the oldest travel agents catering to overseas tourists, he makes arrangements for nearly 2,000 foreigners a year, mainly from the UK.

But beyond security, was Pakistan right for a two-week family holiday, we wondered? Was there enough to satisfy both the adults and an easily bored five-year-old?



Mountain views in Chitral CREDIT: GETTY

Our bespoke itinerary included 14 nights away with a driver and Toyota Hilux to handle the sometimes rough mountain roads.

Heading north from the capital, our first stop was the sublime mountain valley of Chitral. This former princely state within touching distance of the border with Afghanistan is known for its tumultuous polo, more akin to Afghan buzkashi than the formal game played elsewhere. It is also home to some enchanting hotels, namely the Ayun Fort Inn and the Hindu Kush Heights, with rooms that soak up the serene valley views. We wished we had stayed longer.

Northwards and the road becomes rougher before crossing the 12,100ft Shandur Pass, which hosts an annual three-day polo festival. Here on a plateau surrounded by an amphitheatre of mountains, teams from Chitral and neighbouring Gilgit-Baltistan battle for supremacy on what feels like the roof of the world. For the rest of the summer it is left to yaks and shepherds.



Polo at the Shandur Pass CREDIT: ALAMY

Down into Gilgit and on to Karimabad, the capital of Hunza. It is difficult to envisage a more dramatically appointed town, with views of 25,551ft Rakaposhi. All this is presided over by the wooden maze of cubby holes and history which is the 700-year-old former home of the rulers of Hunza, Baltit Fort.

On via a trip to the Chinese border in the snowy Khunjerab Pass, stopping on the way to watch scurrying marmots and majestic ibex, and then into Skardu, where each corner bludgeons the senses with a new view of elemental mountain ranges.



Baltit Fort CREDIT: GETTY

We ended at Fairy Meadows, reached by a nervy journey along a jeep track hugging the mountain side and then onto horses to our chalet in the shadow of Nanga Parbat, the ninth highest peak on earth.

While foreign tourists were rarely glimpsed, middle-class Pakistani holidaymakers keen to escape the scorching plains of Punjab and Sindh and see another side of their country were commonplace, many with children in tow.



Skardu CREDIT: GETTY

It turned out we had no reason to fear the verdict of a five-year-old. She loved it. Animal spotting, horse riding, exploring forts, and crossing rope bridges were all big hits. Long car journeys between towns may put some parents off, but for those who would rather fly, there are airports in Gilgit, Chitral and Skardu.

The Foreign Office travel advice for some parts of the country is still foreboding. Mr Baig believes it is needlessly cautious now security has improved so rapidly. “It is not realistic I have to say,” he said. “They need to revisit their policies.” But even abiding by the advice, the danger spots can be skirted around.

Pakistan has its problems with poverty, corruption and political turbulence. But it also has another side, which it is keen to show to tourists and which will repay the adventurous, whatever their age.