

# Journey to Top of the World

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Some vacation trips make you feel on top of the world but the one on the "Silk Road" linking Pakistan and China through the Karakoram mountains really takes you there.

Dizzy and gasping for oxygen at the 4,850-meter-high border crossing point in the sonny wilderness of Khunjerab Pass you could not feel otherwise. Understandably, visitors driving up to the border are advised not to exert themselves. Blackouts are common among the weak.

For eight years the Khunjerab border remained closed to all except the official traffic. On May 1, it was thrown open to international tourists, a date-fit to honour the thousands of workers who built this "8th wonder of the world."

A driver cruising comfortably along the 774-kilometer-long, nine-meter-wide Karakoram Highway — with an easy gradient despite the

towering mountains on both sides — would hardly realize the enormous job involved in building it.

"It was a difficult task," Brig. Abdul Majeed of the Pakistan Army informed the journalists invited to witness the opening of the road to international tourists.

How modest his statement was became clear from the figures relating to the construction of the road — 8,000 tons of explosives, 80,000 tons of cement, 35,000 tons of coal and 80,000 tons of petroleum products. Eighteen thousand tons of machinery and equipment had to be dropped from the air as there was no other means to transport it there.

But the job of Brig. Majeed's unit to keep the road open throughout the year is no less challenging. Brochures warn the tourists that the travel time estimates given in them "apply only if there is no landslide obstructing the passage of the road."

Karakoram Range mountains are relatively younger than the Hindu

Kush and the western Himalayas which all converge in the region, which boasts 33 peaks rising above 7,000 meters and the heaviest concentration of glaciers outside the polar regions.

Hillsides there have not yet stabilized enough to withstand heavy rains and even long after the rains, slides occur and hold up traffic on the road.

"You can be sure of your vehicle passing through a passage cut through a mountain of slush, mud or rocks blocking your way on the trip," our bus driver Muhammad Ayub said. And we did have the chilling experience at least thrice.

One can cut down the hazards by half by flying into Gilgit, the administrative headquarters of Pakistan's Northern Areas, from Islamabad and then take to the Silk Road to Khunjerab about 300 kilometers to the north.

And the adventure that you missed by not driving up to Gilgit is compensated by the magnificent view of snow-covered mountains, including the 8-125 -meter-high Nanga Parbat peak, the fourth highest in the world, from your aircraft on the flight which costs just 16 dollars.

The Karakoram Highway, better known as the "Silk Road" because it follows part of the silk route between India and China, was at its busiest from the 1st to the 3rd centuries A.D. It offers little in the form of scenic beauty except scattered lush green valleys, but abounds in cultural relics from its Buddhist past and a serenity so blissful that nobody knew about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster there until some British visitors brought the news to Gilgit two days after the news broke out.

But the region served by the highway on Pakistani side is a paradise for mountain lovers. "It offers a lot to trekkers and climbers," said Alan Rouse, British mountaineer and expeditions organizer, who is leading an assault on the

## Journey to the Top of the World: Khunjerab Pass



The road that leads to China. Picture shows a market place at Sakardu in Pakistan. Below: A bird's-eye view of Nanga Parbat. The Karakoram Highway meanders through the valleys of these towering mountains.



8,611-meter-high K2 mountain, the second highest after Everest.

For the adventure-seekers, however, the exotic lies beyond Khunjerab in the Chinese Xinjiang Uigur Autonomous Region where oriental bazars await them.

But the Chinese side is not very enthusiastic about welcoming them in numbers, pleading in-

adequate facilities for them in Tashkurghan, the first town 134 kilometers north of Khunjerab, and Kashghar, the bigger town, another 280 kilometers to the north.

Till such time as hotels, petrol stations and good roads are built on their side, the Chinese would prefer the tourists to come through their official China International

Travel Service to avoid disappointments.

On the Pakistani side too, although facilities exist, mostly in the private sector, the hotel accommodation offered is not of European standard, except for a solitary hotel in Gilgit, the starting point of the exciting journey to the top of the world for most.