

14. Prospects for Cultural Tourism in the Northern Areas

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The Northern Areas possess some of the most dramatic mountain sceneries on earth. Of the world's fourteen summits above eight thousand metres, five are located in the Northern Areas, including K₂ (*Chogori*), the second highest mountain in the world. While the natural beauty of the area attracts a significant number of tourists every year (which also brings a substantial amount of foreign exchange to the country), the unique cultural heritage of the Northern Areas, as presented in previous chapters of this book, has not received so far the attention it deserves. Yet a better appreciation of the local heritage and the active promotion of responsible cultural tourism could have far-reaching implications – fostering a deeper understanding of cultural diversity in the conflict-ridden region and beyond, further improving economic growth, and helping in the rescue of many of the region's natural and cultural jewels that are threatened by overuse or by neglect. Moreover, cultural tourism could help find development alternatives that avoid the trend towards ubiquitous uniformity and help maintain a truly human and enriching environment.

TOURISM IN THE NORTHERN AREAS

Since the end of the nineteenth century, when the earliest Western explorers visited the region, the Northern Areas of Pakistan have been an attraction for alpinists, adventurers, backpackers, individuals, groups and cultural tourists from around the world. The opening of the Karakoram Highway (KKH) in 1978, as well as the establishment of scheduled flight services to Gilgit and Skardu, facilitated access to the area and enabled tourism to grow at a new scale. So far, the fledgling tourism industry of the Northern Areas is currently geared to meet four main categories of tourists: (i) group tourists (using the services of international tour operators); (ii) individual tourists (using occasional local tourist services), (iii) mountaineers and high-altitude trekking expeditions; and (iv) domestic tourists. While Silk Route Tours have gained in importance over the past few years, the category of cultural tourism is still underdeveloped.

Despite the Northern Areas rich mix of natural and cultural heritage, tourism activities in the region are still heavily based upon the areas' outstanding landscape and dramatic mountain scenery (see the insert below). In 2001, before 11 September, an estimated fifty thousand foreign tourists visited the region including a record breaking seventy expeditions with over 450 mountaineers and 1300 trekkers. But 2002 brought a disaster for Pakistan's tourism industry as a result of the September 11 events. However, according to the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, the situation began to improve in 2003. One year later, in 2004, around four thousand foreign mountaineers and trekkers visited the region on the eve of the K₂ Golden Jubilee. These statistics clearly show that the Northern Areas are famous for a particular kind of tourism, while the vast potential for other kinds of tourist activities is not being fully realised.

THE HIGHEST PEAKS OF THE NORTHERN AREAS				
S. No	Peak	Altitude (m)	Range	World Ranking
1	K2 (Chogori)	8,611	Karakoram	2
2	Nanga Parbat	8,125	Himalaya	9
3	Gasherbrum I	8,068	Karakoram	11
4	Broad Peak	8,047	Karakoram	12
5	Gasherbrum II	8,035	Karakoram	14
6	Gasherbrum III	7,952	Karakoram	15
7	Gasherbrum IV	7,925	Karakoram	17
8	Distaghil Sar	7,885	Karakoram	20
9	Kunyang Chish	7,852	Karakoram	22
10	Mashebrum NE	7,821	Karakoram	24
11	Rakaposhi	7,788	Karakoram	27
12	Batura	7,785	Karakoram	28

During the last couple of decades, a number of tour operators have made efforts to diversify tourism by encouraging group tourists interested in nature to visit Hunza or Baltistan during the blossom period and in autumn. This applies mainly to Far Eastern tourists (who also have a potential interest for Buddhist sites), and to some European tourists. Nonetheless, the major focus on the part of the government has been the promotion of mountaineering and high-altitude trekking, which generate precious foreign exchange. The existing trends suggest that most of the mountaineering expeditions and high-altitude trekking groups visit the Baltistan region, whereas normal tourist groups, backpackers, families and individuals prefer Gilgit and the Hunza region. The numbers of domestic tourists visiting Hunza and Baltistan (largely unorganised groups and families) have also increased, particularly during the summers. A largely untapped potential of visitors exists in the Gulf States, since Arabs in search of cooler vacation settings have tended to reduce their trips to Europe and the United States after the events of 9/11.

MAJOR CONSTRAINTS

Despite increasing government attention to tourism development, many restrictive factors have seriously undermined not only the above-mentioned, highly profitable sub-sectors of tourism but also the overall potential for tourism in the Northern Areas. The current policy formulation process for the region's tourism sector has tended to be highly centralised, with little consultation of stakeholders taking place. Important local issues were hardly accorded the priority they should deserve. This framework did not sufficiently enable the private sector to grow and play a positive role in tourism promotion. Rigid procedures, such as restriction on photography of certain sites and features (given the disputed status of the Northern Areas), deprive tourism of incentives and potential. Similarly, security for tourists in the Northern Areas, particularly along parts of the KKH, is a concern in some locations. Border skirmishes, tension with India and other international conflicts have all received large amounts of international media coverage and, unfortunately, created a negative perception of Pakistan and its security situation. Insufficient information, exposure and lack of reliable tourist market data hinder the identification of different tourist preferences and effective planning and policy formulation.

Natural factors restricting the growth of the tourism industry are the Northern Areas peculiar geography, which renders access difficult, and widely varying climatic conditions. Particularly harsh winters result in

shorter tourist seasons, mainly from March to the end of November. Though the Northern Areas are well connected with the rest of the country via the KKH, road conditions are often poor, making journeys long and tiring. Landslides and rock falls frequently lead to road closure and at times present serious danger. The two airports in the Northern Areas, one at Gilgit and the other at Skardu, provide tourists with an alternative to the long journey by road, but the lack of modern navigation facilities at both airports does not allow predictable flight operations during bad weather conditions and results in frequent delays and flight cancellations.

Existing tourism infrastructure is limited to a relatively small number of hotels and motels, located primarily in a few urban centres which provide a relatively poor standard of services and where the quality of accommodation varies greatly. Lack of trained professionals, such as hoteliers and tour operators, also affects the quality of services. Moreover, very few archaeological sites and other attractions in the region dispose of interpretation centres or supporting facilities, such as resting areas, toilets and refreshment points. All major towns and villages are connected to the national telephone network, but its performance is far from satisfactory.



Figs. 316, 317. Above, Rush peak enveloped in clouds; below, Lady Finger peak above Karimbad.

THE NEED FOR SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF RESOURCES

While a largely unplanned and uncoordinated tourism development in the Northern Areas has spurred the region's economic growth, the narrow interest in mountaineering and trekking (with little concern for the social and cultural context) can have negative effects on the environment and on local communities. One major impact is the construction of roads and hotels in often inappropriate locations and with excessive volumes, to the detriment of the scenic value of the landscape – a problem dealt with at some length in chapter 12. Another typical impact is the large amount of solid and human waste left by expeditions along the trekking routes and at the base camps, which is not only an aesthetic concern, but also poses a threat to wildlife and human health and safety. In general, there is a lack of awareness about environmentally-sensitive mountaineering and trekking techniques, proper waste management and the use of alternative energies. On a less material plane, the negative impact can manifest itself in a loss of collective local memory. For instance, *Chogori* (K2) means king of mountains, and *Bubulino Tin* ('Lady Finger of the Ultar range in Hunza) refers to *Bubuli*, a sacred fairy in local mythology. These and many other traditional concepts, which have meaning and significance for the people of the area, are in danger of being lost. Linked as they are with the immediate human environment, they derive their life and meaning from it as an essential part of local attitudes and beliefs.

In isolation and uninformed by local values and customs, tourism can thus have serious repercussions that can put the natural resources under threat and can cause irretrievable losses in the traditional cultural heritage. This raises the issue of preserving basic cultural rights and emphasises the need for well-coordinated protective action, since traditional cultures are in need of integrated strategies for conservation and sustainable management of their heritage. A partnership with the tourism industry can help local societies, as the custodians of heritage assets, to derive material benefits from them by collecting dividends on an entrusted 'capital'. But in order to preserve that 'capital' for future generations, the tourism industry clearly needs to be framed and controlled by much more comprehensive human and cultural development concepts.

For various reasons, the Northern Areas in general – and tourism in particular – have long suffered from neglect. However, since the early 1990s, significant actions have been taken to promote broad-based sustainable development through conservation and revitalisation of cultural heritage. In 1992, the Aga Khan Cultural Service-Pakistan (AKCS-P), on behalf of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), initiated a programme of documentation, restoration and rehabilitation of cultural assets in the Northern Areas. The restoration of the historic Baltit fort was the first major step in this regard, followed by rehabilitation of the traditional settlements of Karimabad, Ganish and Altit in Hunza and Chinpa, Halpapa and Banpi in Baltistan (see chapters 9 and 12). The opening of the restored Baltit fort in 1996 as a museum/cultural centre was a landmark in the history of conservation in Pakistan and introduced the idea of opening local cultural heritage for tourism in the Northern Areas. Focusing on landmark monuments, the AKCS-P identified some of the architecturally significant landmark monuments – forts, palaces, sacred and mundane buildings – for restoration and rehabilitation. In certain cases, adaptive reuse schemes were designed to accommodate contemporary requirements and to ensure long-term viability of these conservation projects through realisation of their economic potential. At the same time, the conservation efforts are also aimed at creating opportunities for tourists to acquire a unique personal experience of the treasures of the local cultural and natural heritage.

In parallel with the physical rehabilitation of the traditional built environment, the non-material expressions of culture have also been considered. These are reflected in the region's languages, its traditional music, festivals, food, sports and handicrafts. Traditional dances and music have their own distinctive style linked to regions and different royal courts. Festivals are multidimensional and represent religion, culture and agricultural practices (see Insert 1 in chapter 8). These festivals are significant for the local people because they also highlight the importance of natural phenomena such as seasons, environment, water, wildlife and life at large. Polo is the most popular traditional sport in the region and was patronised by local *rajas* and *mirs* for generations. It is played throughout the Northern Areas and Chitral but is particularly popular in Baltistan. The famous Shandur Polo Tournament is held every year in early June at Shandur pass (over 3660 metres above sea level) and attracts a large number of national as well as international tourists. Drawing on these traditions, the AKCS-P has initiated the Silk Route Festival in various locations of the Northern Areas, to keep local customs alive and to promote cultural exchange with neighbouring regions and countries.

People from the Northern Areas, and particularly women, are skilful in handicrafts, carpet weaving and embroidery. Hunza, where more than three thousand women are engaged in embroidery and handicraft, is famous for such products. Women not only work with geometric patterns but also use traditional themes



Figs. 318, 319. The old polo grounds of Baltit (left) and Altit (right) in the 1930s, as taken by D. Lorimer. In the meantime, these prime traditional community spaces have partly been eaten up by encroaching public buildings or by roads.

taken from history, religion and sacred animals (ibex). Similarly, fine woodcarving with Tibetan and Kashmiri influence, precious stones and herbal medicines from the Baltistan region are of interest to a large number of tourists. The region is also famous for various dry-fruit products and healthy apricot kernel oil, which can be used for cooking as well as for skin care. Recent initiatives aimed at reviving traditional arts and crafts with the financial assistance of international donors have enabled master artisans to transfer their traditional knowledge and skills to younger generations and complement other cultural development efforts launched by the AKCS-P.

THE SHIGAR FORT RESIDENCE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

In this overall context, the opening of the Shigar fort as an exclusive heritage guest house (Shigar Fort Residence) in July 2004 heralds a new experience in Pakistan. This bold initiative will provide new prospects to the dying architectural heritage of the region. The reuse concept for the Shigar fort, as explained in chapter 10, attempts to strike a balance between, on the one hand, a museal site which impresses the visitor with its massive seventeenth-century stone construction, containing a number of preserved original or partly reconstructed rooms, and, on the other, a very special type of resort offering a unique experience through a number of authentic guest rooms in the historic palace. The conversion of the fort/palace into a guest house has been designed in such a way as to remain faithful to the original structure and minimise modern architectural interventions. The cultural attraction of the site is founded on the architectural merit of the fort and on the exquisite woodcarvings in the interior and on the exterior of the building. The presence of several historic buildings and old settlements in its vicinity constitutes another asset, further enhanced by the ongoing village rehabilitation projects (see chapter 12).

Drawing on the pilot character of this project, a series of related initiatives are now being studied which in due time should materialise in a much wider cultural development framework for the Northern Areas of Pakistan, based on the promotion of a new type of culturally and ecologically sensitive tourism. Experi-

ence from many other places around the world suggests that visitors from ‘over-developed’ countries are hungry for cultural diversity and highly receptive of vernacular environments. They have a keen interest in experiencing and understanding traditional living cultures of different origins – quite apart from the appreciation of virgin natural sites. Future projects, such as additional guest houses set inside the Altit and Khaplu compounds, the revival of festivals and promotion of traditional arts and crafts, as well as the rehabilitation of part of the first jeep road in the Hunza-Nager valleys, will be part of the emerging cultural development framework, the database of which will be provided by the Inventories (see chapter 8).

NEW VISITOR CIRCUITS

The future guest houses will become the qualitative highlights in a series of tourist Heritage Circuits that will allow tourists to absorb living mountainous cultures perfectly in harmony with their natural environment. The following circuits have been considered so far:

Shigar circuit

Shigar valley, the gateway to the mighty K2 and Concordia peaks, is the most fertile and flat valley in the whole of the Northern Areas. The Braldu river (also known as the Shigar river) runs through it. At the northern end of the valley is the Baltoro glacier from whose snout the Braldu emerges, one of the most memorable views of pristine nature. Treks both over glaciers and alongside various streams allow for all kinds of adventures, from one-day strolls to strenuous, challenging treks over five-thousand-metre-high passes. Three eight-thousand-metre peaks, K2, Broad Peak and Gasherbrum, greet those who can afford to trek for about ten days.

Similar to the Karimabad area, the built heritage around Shigar has the quality of a World Heritage Site. Key features are: the restored Shigar Fort Residence (*Fong Khar*, or ‘palace on the rocks’); the old ruins of the old fort on the top of the steep rock overlooking Shigar fort; the Khanqah-e-Moallah (a religious retreat for prayer and meditation), the second largest in existence after the one in Srinagar; the delicate and exquisitely decorated wooden *astanas* (tombs) of a number of saints; the restored fourteenth-century Amburiq mosque, allegedly the oldest in Baltistan; the impressive Buddhist rock site with interesting engravings, about an hour’s walk from Skardu town.

Visits can also extend to a number of historic settlements demonstrating the traditional harmony between built environment and the natural setting. In some villages, it is possible to watch craftsmen weaving shawls in the traditional manner, while others carve local serpentine stone or produce apricot kernel oil. New training workshops for woodcarving have also been set up by the AKCS-P.

Options for trekking up the Shigar stream (day trips and longer ones arriving at Hushe valley) or to the lake lying between Shigar and Skardu, Jarbasha Lake, add to the attractions of Shigar. Two hours from Shigar, there are hot springs in Chatron to be visited. In Shigar itself, polo matches are generally played in summer on the excellent polo ground.

Skardu circuit

Skardu combines sandy desert dunes with verdant irrigated plains set amid towering mountains. The Indus river, which by the time it reaches Skardu has travelled over a thousand kilometres, lazily spreads out in the valley and then gathers itself up and hurtles down the gorge as it takes leave of Skardu.



Figs. 320, 321. Public celebration with music and dance in the *himalter* of Aliabad, at the bottom of the valley below Baltit, in the 1930s (D. Lorimer). This community space no longer exists as the village has been heavily impacted by the Karakoram Highway.

The Kharpocho fort guards Skardu and is a good vantage point. Visits to the Manthal Buddha Rock just below Satpara lake are particularly fascinating for visitors. A stroll through the old bazaar can follow, where unique handicraft items of varying age are on sale alongside the best aquamarine and tourmaline gems, as well as trekking and mountaineering equipment.

A day trip by road can be planned to the 3900/4200-metre-high Deosai plateau, about two hours drive away and coloured by flowers in their millions in July and August. If one is fortunate the famous brown bear may be glimpsed.

Khaplu circuit

Khaplu is a steep narrow valley with irrigated terraces more in keeping with the appearance of the Hunza valley. Khaplu palace (to be restored), the polo ground, the famous Chaqchan mosque and the *khan-qah* are the most attractive traditional buildings and spaces in Khaplu. A good part of the day is required to visit these.

Khaplu town is a bustling place with stone utensils, goat and sheep hair rugs and other traditional items available. Khaplu makes a good starting point for treks to Hushe valley or farther afield over the Gondogoro pass to the Baltoro.

Gilgit valley circuit

Gilgit is the teeming growth pole of the Northern Areas and has served as the administrative headquarters since the beginning of the British period. It is also the melting pot for various ethnic groups both from inside and outside the Northern Areas. Throughout history, Gilgit was invaded by the Chinese, Hindus, Buddhists, Tibetans, Kashmiris, Chitralis and, last in line, the British. These frequent raids resulted in destruction of the old heritage and reconstruction by the new invaders, consequently, there is not much in the shape of attractions for tourists left except the British colonial heritage – and the colourful markets full of local and Chinese products brought in via the Khunjerab pass.



Fig. 322. Trekking in the high mountains of the Karakoram.

The proposed circuit within and nearby Gilgit include the site of Taj Mughul Minar/Shikari, built on a prominent ridge overlooking Gilgit. It was probably a Buddhist *chorten* which was rebuilt when the legendary Badakhshani general, Taj Mughal, took Gilgit and brought Islam here. This visit can be followed by a day-long trek to Jutial Gah. A day could be spent visiting Chinar Bagh with its memorial dedicated to the liberation of Gilgit situated along the Gilgit river, shopping in the bazaar area, and then visiting the British cemetery, which contains Hayward's grave, and finally to the Buddha rock at Kargah *nullah*. Fishing in the Kargah stream could bring the day to a close.

Half a day could be spent visiting the educational facilities and institutions in Konodas, driving across the old Danyor suspension bridge (built in the early 1960s) and visiting Danyor Rock with its inscriptions and also the Chinese memorial to the KKH builders. In season, there will also be occasions to watch a polo match (played in the traditional style without umpires/referees) on any one of the three polo grounds. Other possibilities for a day trip are: a visit to the alpine resort of Naltar (about two hours jeep drive from Gilgit) or an equally exciting trip to Bagrot valley for views of Haramosh peak and for visiting traditional settlements.

Hunza-Nager valley circuit

This is possibly the most picturesque circuit of all in terms of nature, culture and, most importantly, local communities. The majestic Rakaposhi dominates the skyline with the triangular Diran standing next to it, followed by the Golden Peak, Dastaghil Sar, Ultar Peaks and Bubulino Tin forming a circle around Central Hunza and Nager that keeps the visitor spellbound.

Other attractions are the human complements to the works of nature, such as the irrigation channels along the bottom of surrounding mountains, terraced fields from the river bed up towards skilfully constructed traditional settlements and apricot gardens. Irrigation channels, such as the 'Samarqand *kohl*' which runs over fifteen kilometres and the whole network of other channels from the single source of the Ultar glacier are a true work of art, considering the very basic and rudimentary tools that the communities had to build them with.

Visiting the Hopar and Hispar glaciers – one dark brown and the other gleaming white – is about an hour's jeep drive from Karimabad in the Nager valley. It is also possible to drive to the Batura glacier en route to the Khunjerab pass, to see colonies of ibexes, marmot and yaks and possibly get a glimpse of a marco-polo sheep in the Khunjerab National Park. Other suggestions are to walk up the Gulkin glacier which overlooks the KKH; take a break at Borith lake and watch the migratory birds enjoying themselves; trek up to the Ultar for a day trip or drive up to Duker and have a sunset and sunrise view on the Rakaposhi. Walking down to Altit is an experience providing a cross-section of mountain geography. The highlight may then be a visit to the preserved historic settlements of Karimabad, Altit, Ganish and

Haldeikish Sacred Rock. Trekking up to the base camp of Rakaposhi (three days) or Rash lake in Hopar (seven days) are possibilities for experienced mountaineers.

CONCLUSIONS

Through the interactive aggregation of the AKCS-P's past, current and future initiatives, a new cultural tourism strategy is being implemented. The proposed guest houses will enable tourists to choose between relaxing vacations of a few days or adventure-type holidays, with each location providing a unique cultural and social ambiance. By linking them up, the various circuits can extend to form longer tours connecting more cultural sites and individual circuits such as Chitral, Kalash, Gilgit, Hunza, Shigar, Khaplu, Skardu and Islamabad. Some components of these circuits are already tourist attractions, despite the fact that very few of them provide opportunities for well-informed cultural tourism. Hunza-Nager, Gilgit valley, Karimabad, Skardu, Shigar and Khaplu are well-known destinations and have good potential to develop into hubs of future tourist circuits. The new conservation and rehabilitation initiatives will establish them as destinations for authentic cultural tourism, based on a heritage concept that gives value, meaning and context to the buildings and places to be visited.



Fig. 323. The main spine of the rehabilitated village of Karimabad leading up to the restored fort. New business opportunities emerge along the major tourist circuits which have to be properly managed.

The traditional cultural heritage of the Northern Areas has great potential to stimulate the local economy through the development of tourism, which, if handled properly and buttressed by national legislation, can also boost natural and cultural conservation. Promotion of sensitive cultural tourism in the area can foster a deeper understanding of regional (as well as international) issues linked to the protection of the environment, sustainable development, poverty reduction through cultural development and positive interpretation of cultural diversity. Meanwhile, a deeper involvement with the traditional cultural heritage of the Northern Areas can also provide incentives to reflect on the character and implications of a somewhat aggressive type of 'modernity' that often tends to judge and dismiss traditional cultures as being backward and having no future. In this fractured world, where ideological polarities have provoked so many avoidable conflicts, cultural pluralism and mutual understanding have become essential, since they can do away with prejudices and can help abolish implicit or explicit assumptions of cultural superiority, which have to be overcome to open the door for genuine and productive ways of cooperation.

