

Dangerous bus ride on Pakistan's Karakoram Highway in winter - January 1988

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Men in Khaplu village end December 1987

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(My editor insisted that I use a somewhat impersonal style in this article and did not allow me to write it up as a personal experience, which, of course, it was. I wrote this after returning to Islamabad from a two-week trip to Baltistan in January 1988. This is the unedited version)

ISLAMABAD -- In the winter, when the weather is bad in the mountains, taking a bus on Pakistan's perilous Karakoram Highway (KKH) can be every bit as exciting as a game of Russian Roulette.

There is nothing like a rough ride of four and a half hours on the back of a four -- wheel-drive pickup truck on a bitterly cold winter morning for the traveler to appreciate the awe-inspiring grandeur and desolation of the Karakoram mountain range, which contains the greatest concentration of high peaks anywhere and is regarded by geologists as one of the most unstable but also most fascinating features on the earth's surface.

Along the 100-kilometer dirt road through the wild gorges of the Shyok and Indus rivers from Khaplu to Skardu in Baltistan one cannot help feeling that the enormous bleak rock faces, the jagged, snow-covered peaks poking into the clouds, the eerily frozen waterfalls,

the huge boulders strewn all around and the vast scree slopes must belong to some distant uninhabitable planet but not to this earth. All of this spells danger. Under a gloomy, leaden sky, with the sun's rays unable to break through thick clouds that hide the high mountain tops, there appears to be a veiled threat of impending disaster.

From Skardu, a small town in a wide, sand-covered valley at 2,300 meters, the road continues along the Indus River through dangerous gorges for about 500 kilometers before turning east away from the river on its way to Rawalpindi. If one travels on a public bus, this trip on the KKH has to be made in two stages. It involves a seven-hour journey from Skardu to Gilgit followed by a grueling sixteen-hour trip to Rawalpindi on a different bus.

For four days from the end of 1987 until the first day of 1988 heavy clouds hung above Skardu Valley and hid the many 5,000-meter mountain peaks surrounding it on all sides. As the small airport in the valley had no radar, all flights were cancelled. The sky looked as though there was worse weather to come, so it seemed that there was no choice but to court disaster and take the bus.

Everyone in the packed, gaily-painted bus appeared to be in good mood when the journey began on the first day of the new year. The gloomy atmosphere outside did not affect the passengers for a long time as the bus sped on the asphalt road to the western end of the valley, then moved slowly over a narrow

suspension bridge across the Indus and entered the gorge.

Compared with the bleakness of the grey, brown and black tones of the massive rock formations on its sides, the river was a pleasant sparkling green color -- almost inviting save for the fact that it was at times separated from the road by several hundred meters of sheer cliffs.

For most of the way the road appeared in good condition except for only one or two spots where part of its foundation had collapsed and plunged down the precipice into the Indus far below, leaving a gaping hole. The driver was quite agile and avoided such death traps easily. At least two small bridges spanning gaping chasms above raging tributaries of the Indus appeared rather dilapidated. The driver accelerated, apparently anxious to cross the bridges before they collapsed.

Some eighty kilometers before Gilgit a number of boulders the size of large cars had broken off from a gigantic rock formation that hung threateningly above the road. The road was hopelessly blocked. A maintenance crew was already at work preparing the area for blasting.

A little farther west, high above the road on a steep scree slope that seemed to stretch endlessly into the sky, two local shepherds herded their sheep and goats down as quickly as they could. The workers had signaled to them to come down because the blasting might make the scree come alive and cause a huge landslide. The shepherds wore roughly cut pieces of goatskin wrapped around their feet and ankles in lieu of shoes. They could perfectly well have fit into a Stone Age setting, with nothing on their bodies to show that they lived in the 20th century.

Luckily for the travelers, the three heavy blasts that were required to break up the boulders did not bring down any more rocks although cracks appeared in some huge slabs that hung precariously above the road. A lone bulldozer took more than two hours to push the debris over the edge into the Indus. Darkness fell soon after the road was cleared.

The bulldozer then headed west on the narrow road at a snail's pace, and the bus driver had no choice but to follow at the same speed for some time. The driver quickly became irritated. He tried to pass the bulldozer several times but there was not enough space.

A military officer ran up on the road from behind the bus and knocked on the driver's side window. The two exchanged some angry words. The driver had been ordered to pull the bus up to the edge of the precipice to allow a military truck to pass. He did so but complained bitterly.

Then the officer also ordered the bulldozer to get out of the way at the next spot where this was possible.

The military truck sped on ahead, followed quickly by the bus, whose driver appeared very angry and nervous all of a sudden. He was determined to pass the military truck, which was already moving quite fast on this perilous road with rock walls or scree slopes to the right and a gaping black chasm to the left where in many places parts of the asphalt had broken off and plunged down into the gorge. The bus driver used his ear-shattering horn and flashed his lights wildly to drive his message home to the soldiers.

Finally, they let him pass. But they stayed close behind and flashed their lights as well, irritating the bus driver even more. His antics behind the steering wheel became increasingly wild and on several occasions the bus very nearly went over the edge of the cliff. Two passengers sitting in the front abreast of the driver angrily warned him to slow down. Others anxiously mumbled prayers. The angry warnings seemed to madden the driver even more, and some other passengers urged everyone to calm down. The atmosphere in the bus became increasingly tense, laden with a strange mixture of anger and naked fear.

Suddenly, there was another bus in front and the angry driver of the first bus flashed his lights to signal that he wanted to pass. The bus in front slowed down but stayed in the middle of the road for some time.

When it finally allowed the first bus to pass its driver was fuming. To make matters still worse, the other bus also stayed close behind and flashed its lights. Many passengers on the first bus were terrified but no one dared to approach the driver for fear of distracting him in this extremely dangerous situation.

After what appeared to be an eternity, the valley widened and the bus stopped at a petrol station. When the bus left the station after refueling, a teenage boy sat down on an improvised seat next to the driver and this seemed to calm the man down. Later, he let the boy drive the rest of the way to Gilgit. Although the boy's driving was somewhat unsteady from lack of experience, the passengers were relieved that the bus was now moving more slowly and carefully.

Next morning, another bus with a few foreigners among the many passengers left Gilgit on the long journey to Rawalpindi. The driver was a man of about 50, clearly very experienced and skillful. But on this trip the road was in very bad condition -- and the weather turned worse.

There were scores of spots on the way where rocks of all sizes had fallen from above and very nearly blocked the road. Often the space left between the bigger boulders and the edge of the precipice was just barely wide enough to allow the bus to pass.

Again and again, the bus lurched sideways as it moved slowly over very uneven terrain past big boulders. Some terrified passengers, who saw the gaping abyss come up from below their windows as the heavy vehicle seemed close to the point of rolling over, leaned into the aisle and looked the other way.



KKH Gilgit-Skardu road, August 1985 – taken on my first trip on this highway

At one point, some rocks rolled away from under the wheels of the bus at the edge of the broken road and the driver had to quickly steer the vehicle towards a big pile of boulders away from the precipice. The boulders tore into the side of the bus, causing minor damage, but passengers later congratulated the driver on his presence of mind.

After a seemingly endless series of similar incidents, the passengers felt relieved when the bus crossed a bridge on the Indus, hoping that the worst was over. But then, shortly before dark, it began to rain.

Water is both a boon and a bane in the mountains. Local villagers need it for drinking, cooking, washing and irrigation but it also inevitably brings down boulders and mud, and it causes the landslides that so often obstruct the KKH.

The bus drove on into the night on the wet road, dodging many more fresh rockfalls. In one area, the going was slow over a stretch of at least 20 kilometers where many landslides had completely blocked the KKH for over two weeks in October. The road was still badly scarred and the piles of debris on one side did not allow two vehicles to pass each other along most of this stretch.

After the bus finally crossed the last bridge over the Indus and headed out of the gorge, the driver stepped on the accelerator. As the road was still dangerous, some passengers became concerned that the bus was moving too fast. An Australian woman expressed her worries to a Pakistani passenger who translated for the driver.

After more than 12 hours on the KKH the driver was clearly becoming tired and it seemed that he was accelerating because he was afraid to fall asleep. There were a few more hair-raising moments when the driver nearly seemed to lose control of the bus in dangerous curves. But he finally stopped and allowed a younger colleague to drive the rest of the way to Rawalpindi.

It is by braving such a danger-filled winter journey on the KKH that one can learn to appreciate the remarkable feat that the building of this road represented. One can also easily understand how the KKH claimed at least 500 lives during the 20-odd years of its construction and many hundreds more in the last eight years since it was opened.