



Cinda Hunter



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Pakistan was not what I expected. Admittedly I did not visit Peshawar or even Islamabad, but the stereotype of fundamentalism and religious zealotry and of a backward and unsophisticated country was not the Pakistan I visited.

I was invited to stay with a friend who works at a consulate in Karachi. My first impression of the city was of highways and good infrastructure. On my first evening, I accompanied her to a dinner party. Our dinner companions included local architects, artists, clothing designers, interior designers, business people as well as foreign diplomats. The people I met are extraordinarily friendly and hospitable, they are highly educated, articulate and interesting and most speak exquisite, unaccented English. Many are educated in England. All are devastated that their country is so alienated and their countrymen so feared. They feel that war is totally unnecessary and nothing more than a huge waste of money. Only one woman (a clothing designer) wore a head scarf.

I spent some time with less educated Pakistanis also. I met with no hostility or aggression. On the contrary, they were all hugely fascinated by me! They see almost no foreigners in Pakistan as tourism is non-existent. People everywhere from truckers to day trippers came to stare at me and my friend and many wanted to be photographed with us! Young girls, young men, older couples...all wanted to know where I was from and many wanted to assure me that they are opposed to war. I was fascinated that so many of the young women wore jeans and make-up. While some women I saw had a head covering, very few wore a burka.



My friend sent me with her driver for a day trip around Karachi. I visited the extraordinary sandstone tombs of the Jokhio and Baloch tribes at Choukoundi. These date to the 15th to 18th C and are amazing in that the sandstone (which was brought in from elsewhere) is so elaborately carved and has survived the elements - unprotected - so well. The Keeper of the tombs wears the characteristic hat indicating he is from the local Sindh region. The original inhabitants of this area are from the Indus valley civilisations. The hat is distinguished by the “arched” centre worn over the forehead. The Sindhi people can be of any religious group – Muslim, Christian or Hindu. The photo (bottom right) shows two Sindhi hats which I bought for the shop set against the backdrop of a magnificent Afghan embroidered textile.



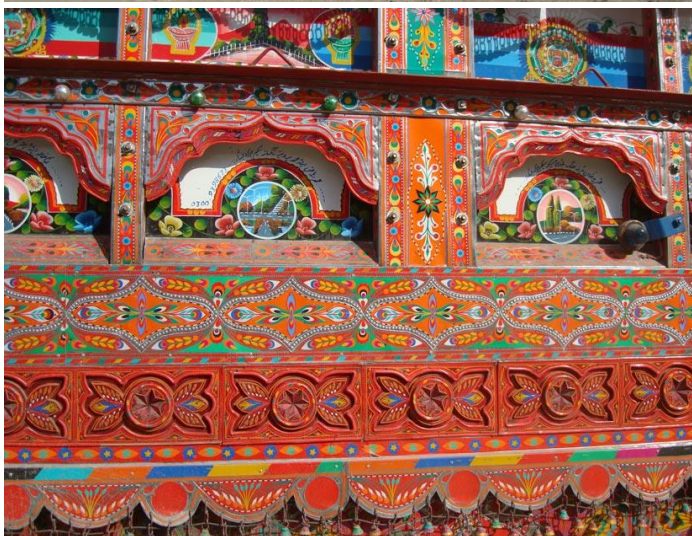
We drove through the countryside to the village of Hala which specialises in crafts such as block-printing, tie-dyeing, pottery and furniture making. I walked through the markets and visited craftspeople, all of whom were as fascinated by me as I was them!



Although it is fairly arid with areas similar to acacia scrub in semi-desert, the countryside closer to Hala is filled with farms irrigated from canals. There are fields of mustard-seed, wheat, sugarcane, bananas, coconut and date palms, roses and of course forests of mango trees. Mangoes are almost a religion in Pakistan, where every person describes with a light of ecstasy in their eyes which is their favourite type! Sadly I was there at the end of winter which is mango free!

Everywhere you drive, you are overwhelmed by the glory of the trucks and minibuses of Pakistan. I always thought that the Tata trucks in India were objects of decadent splendour, but I had not yet been blinded by a Pakistan special!

I am told that a truck driver will spend US \$5000 (YES this is not a typo) to outfit his truck. He does not have a home, other than possibly a room in a slum. He will spend his life paying back what he spends on his pride and joy! They are mindboggling! The oldest trucks are made by Bedford and these masterpieces are totally outfitted in wood. The cab, the door, the top overhang and all the sides are often solid wood. The doors are elaborately carved hardwood and rival Indian palace doors! The trucks are then painted and decorated, sometimes only in geometric designs but usually incorporating birds and scenery and occasionally the face of a famous singer or even a politician (no ladies as they can run foul of the Muslim prohibition on representations of people). Newer trucks are metal and the designs are either cut out metal work or cut out reflective plastic layered one on top of each other and then applied all over the vehicle. They are decorated with additional tassels, bells, feather dusters, cloth flags and anything else that glitters and shines and jingles. Every surface is painted or decorated. They are artworks on wheels!



I spent a weekend visiting Lahore, one of the old cities of Pakistan where the Moghul emperors built extraordinary tombs and mosques. The Badshahi Mosque (see lead picture), one of the largest Mosques in the world and glorious in its almost ethereal sense of floating splendour, was built by Aurangzeb in 1674.



Lahore Fort



Jahangir Khan's Tomb, built by Shah Jehan who also built the Taj Mahal in India, shows similarity to the Taj Mahal in the delicacy and extraordinary craftsmanship of the breathtaking inlaid stonework. Like the Taj, semi-precious stones are inlaid into the marble.



Wazir Khan's mosque was built by the Governor of Lahore in 1634 during Shah Jehan's reign. This had an incredible presence and was one of my favourites.



The Shish Mahal or Palace of Mirrors built by Shah Jehan for his Empress in 1631. Apart from the mirrors, its masterful carved stone "jalis" or fretwork windows rival those of the Palace of Winds in Jaipur.

On a lighter note ... be grateful for South African dentistry!

Sadly because there is no foreign tourism in Pakistan there are few shops selling anything for foreigners to buy! Wealthy locals buy conventional gold and gemstone jewellery and designer brand name handbags and sunglasses. Tribal artefacts, jewellery, textiles and furniture are not easily found!



In terms of buying for the shop, I managed to find some old and glorious textiles brought from Afghanistan, some Sindhi hats and embroidery and some beautiful beaten and cutwork copper frames and wall lights, but sadly this area of Pakistan does not compare with India for my kind of shopping!



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