

January 2006 from Pakistan – Kashmir Earthquake zone

40 years of traveling and I have finally reached one of the ends-of-the-earth. There are certain several of these, but I cannot imagine a place more remote than those I have been the last few days.

The planning for this leg to Pakistan began rather late. There was a need to spend time with staff and board members of our various ministries in West Bengal, India. It is always better to combine visits to several ministries when traveling this far from home.

Some amazingly compassionate people responded to the news reports of the horrendous earthquake in Pakistan that killed thousands. Partners is not primarily a relief agency but these people know that we have a network of gifted people on the ground, that are able to respond immediately without parachuting supplies and foreign help into the country.

The leadership in Pakistan selected a few stricken communities that could be assisted in depth over the long term. In a disaster, most of the immediate help goes to the people near the main roads. Those in the remote areas that have little access are left to fend for themselves. Our partners found several communities in areas that are very difficult to reach.

The communities worst hit are of course, Muslim and an ethnic group called the Pashtuns. I cannot express what an amazing experience it was for me, a jaded traveler, to visit and meet these people.

Ever since I was a kid, I remember reading and admiring the Pathan warriors that fought with the British. These are very scary looking guys that wear turbans; have ammunition belts strapped across their chests and walk through high mountains for weeks at a time. They wear skirts but hey, who would call guys with ammo strapped on their chests, girlie men. If you visit our home, you will see we have some porcelain likenesses of these Pathans on our wall in 3D.

A few quickly exchanged emails with our partners in Lahore did not make for a detailed plan. I arrived without much idea where we would go and how we would get there. On to the Silk Road used by Marco Polo and Alexander the Great, 12 hours later, driving folded up in a Japanese mini van, we arrived high in the foothills of the Himalayas at a small inn, which I shall charitably describe as 'rustic.' One room was reserved for 5 of us.



The details of eating and sleeping are things for a longer, more boring letter, but breakfast standing up, outdoors in the street of some podunk town in northern Pakistan mountains at minus 5 Celcius, are memories that will stick with me. We were back in the van at 5:00 a.m. with a 4 ½ hour drive further up the

mountains. This road had potholes that would make a Geo disappear no such thing as wimpy guard rails. The last 45 minutes of the van portion of the ride saw the road dwindle to cow path status.

We were told that we would have to hike from where the van was parked to get to these remote villages. They estimated about 45 minutes to an hour to hike but forgot to



mention that was for a Pashtun or iron man participant, not aging desk-jockeys. We hiked for 30 minutes and then had to remove shoes and roll pants up to ford a large, rather cold river flowing from the snow covered peaks about 1500 metres above us. Once across, I asked the inevitable 'are we there yet' and the Pathan guides pointed up the 'hill'. That hill was another 2000 metres, virtually straight up.

In total, 5 solid hours of hiking to over 3500 metres (12000 feet or so) where the air gets thin and old guys die of heart attacks.

If you receive the pictures included, you will note my advanced mountain gear including



a preppy blue blazer and Florsheim leathers, that fortunately had rubber soles. This brilliant sartorial decision was made when some wonderful people in Milton, Bob and Mary Lou Hawley (BOMAR) donated bags of clothing for these earthquake victims. My bags were rather over-filled and I had to drop a few items like....**proper shoes and coat.**

...this update is getting rather lengthy and my plane is ready to take me back to Delhi, so I will save some of the amazing stories of the earthquake on the people on the top of the mountain for the next update.

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