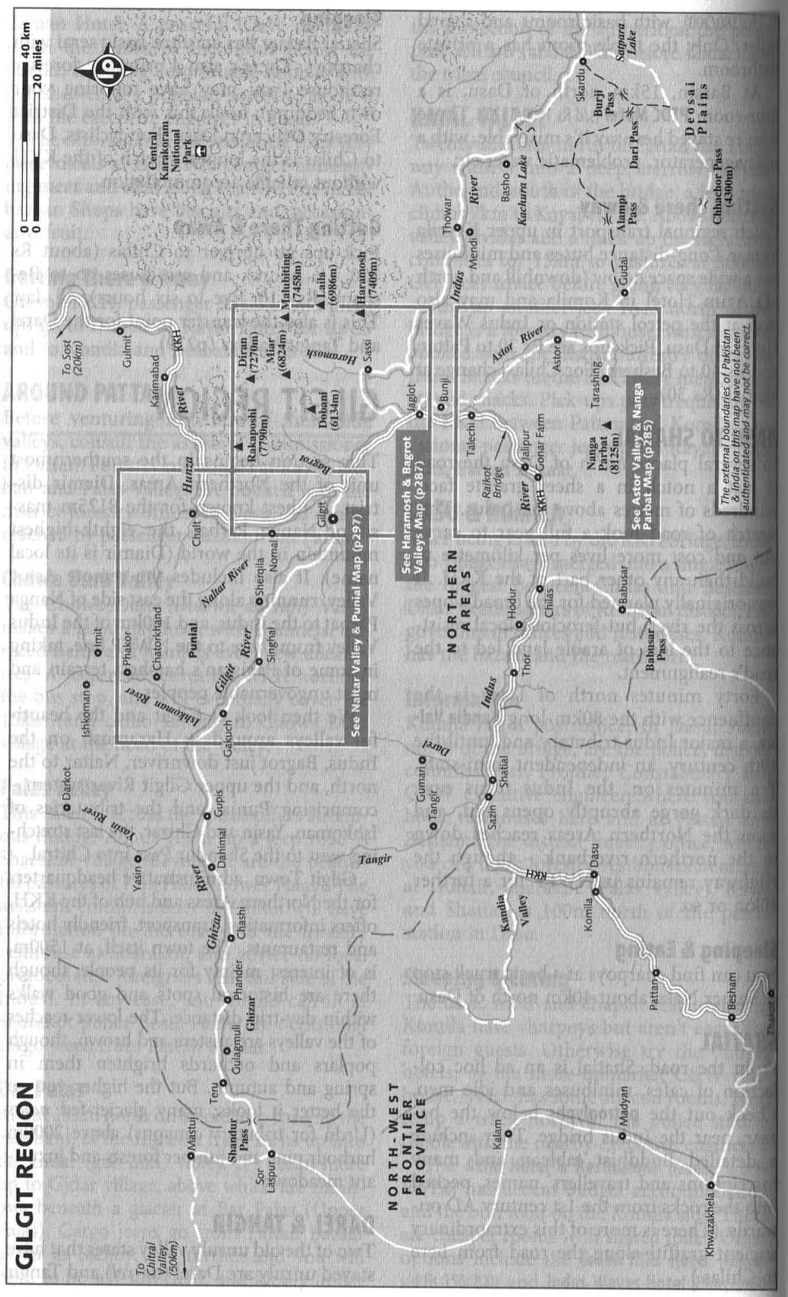


(*taan-geer*), which meet the Indus across from Shatial. They voluntarily joined Pakistan only in 1952, and even today have the Northern Areas' worst reputation for lawlessness. 'Administration' from Chilas mostly means police garrisons to keep the customary blood feuds from boiling over.

Reports of gun battles between locals and police are common, and well-worn travellers' stories tell of theft and even rape. It's hard to separate fact from fiction, but this clearly isn't a very safe place to go, and outsiders aren't warmly welcomed. It's a pity, because the valleys are said to be rich in natural beauty and archaeological remains. Darel was the site of some important Buddhist monasteries.

NAPWD resthouses at Tangir village and Gumari (the main village of Darel) can be booked in Chilas (see p281). You can hire a pick-up at Shatial or a jeep at Chilas, though your first stop should be the assistant commissioner or the chief of police at Tangir or Gumari. Both are about 20km from Shatial.

SHATIAL TO CHILAS

Half an hour east of Shatial, an ominous string of white markers prefigures 'Basha Dam', according to a sign. This dam would permanently submerge many petroglyphs that Unesco has identified as of great artistic and historical value. Ten minutes onwards the Highway crosses from NWFP into the Northern Areas, passing a line drawn on a map by Sir Cyril Radcliffe in the feverish fortnight before Partition in 1947. This was the intended border between Pakistan and India, disarranged by an uprising in Gilgit.

An hour east of Shatial, **Thor** (pronounced 'tore') is the site of some rock inscriptions, below the bridge over Thor Gah. Twenty minutes on, across the river, the remains of a 1000-year-old fort are on a ridge to the right of a ravine called Hodur Gah. The rocks below the fort are covered with old inscriptions.

West of Chilas the Indus is flat and meandering. On the south side, the Lesser Himalaya stretches 80km towards Punjab. On the north side are the Hindu Raj, the eastern arm of the Hindukush. From **Hodur**, 20 minutes west of Chilas, take your first look at Nanga Parbat.

CHILAS

☎ 05812

Most visitors are here to look at the petroglyphs or to cross the Babusar Pass (see also p271). There are few other reasons to stop. Foreign women especially may feel unwelcome.

Even after Kashmiri–British rule was imposed a century ago, the Indus Valley west of Chilas was a hornet's nest of tiny republics; there was one in almost every side valley, each loosely guided by a *jirga* (council of tribal elders) but effectively leaderless, all at war with one another and feuding internally. Though administratively lumped with Gilgit, Chilas and its neighbours are temperamentally more like Indus Kohistan, probably owing to a similarly hostile environment and the same Sunni Muslim orthodoxy (their ancestors were forcibly converted centuries ago by Pashtun crusaders, whereas hardly anyone north of Gilgit is Sunni).

The large Chilas Fort was first garrisoned to protect British supply lines over the Babusar Pass, and beefed up after local tribes nearly overran it in 1893. Now a police post, it has put a lid on Chilas, though not on the Darel and Tangir Valleys to the west.

Chilasis are Shina speakers, with some Pashtun settlers speaking Pashto. Urdu and some English are also spoken.

Orientation

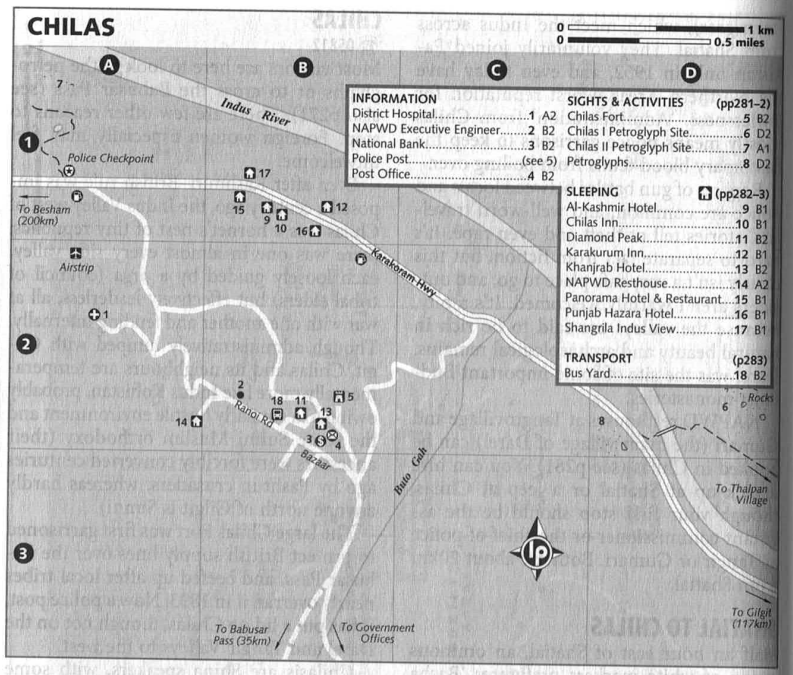
The better hotels geared to travellers are on the KKH and the town is on a plateau above. You can flag a pick-up for the 3km ride up to the bazaar from the police checkpoint, or walk up the Buto Gah road. The bazaar huddles by the fort, with a bus yard to one side. South of the bazaar, a left fork drops to district offices, while the right fork climbs towards Babusar Pass.

Information

On the road to the bazaar is the NAPWD executive engineer, where resthouses can be booked. The post office is opposite the fort, which houses the police post. A district hospital is at the bottom of Hospital Rd.

Sights & Activities

Local police are usually happy to show guests around the **fort** where they are stationed. Your hotel manager may be able to help organise this. The interesting stone-filled



wooden battlements with gun sights are crumbling away and the blackened kitchen looks to have been in use since 1893.

Chilas is surrounded by **petroglyphs**, which are easy to access, though be prepared for high temperatures and take plenty of water. See The Petroglyphs at Chilas (p283).

Sleeping & Eating

On the KKH (and nearest the petroglyphs) are several tourist hotels with mid-range singles/doubles, sit-down toilets, hot showers (a moot point in this cauldron of rocks where summer temperatures often exceed 40°C) and adequate food. The evaporative air coolers common to these Highway hotels are effective in the dry heat and don't overly draw on the limited electricity. The hotels up in the bazaar are foreigner-friendly but the same can't necessarily be said for the other clientele. In these cheap local inns, the rooms are basic and the bedding dirty.

BUDGET

NAPWD resthouse (d Rs 300) Good, but it's popular in summer. Other NAPWD resthouses are at Jalipur (west of Chilas), Gonar Farm (east of Chilas) and Gini (east of Chilas and off the Highway), and there's a primitive one at Babusar village on the Kaghan Valley road (see p271; the only one that closes in winter). All can be booked in Chilas with the executive engineer (see p281).

Diamond Peak (s/d Rs 100/120) In the bazaar, with similar rooms to the NAPWD resthouse.

Al-Kashmir Hotel (☎ 50633; s/d Rs 250/300) Basic Al-Kashmir has small air-cooled rooms with squat toilets and cold shower. The **restaurant** (mains Rs 30-70) produces inexpensive chicken and mutton curries.

Punjab Hazara Hotel (☎ 50572; s/d Rs 50/100, d with hot water & sit-down toilet Rs 150) Cheap but adequate, with rather grotty rooms and an earthy charpoy dining room with cheap curries. There's little English spoken.

Khanjrab Hotel (s/d Rs 100/150) Perhaps you will find the garlanded poster of Osama Bin Laden in the dining room a little disconcerting. The manager of this bazaar hotel is friendly, though, and the stuffy rooms diabolically grotty.

THE PETROGLYPHS AT CHILAS

The ancient routes through the Karakoram are dotted with places where travellers pecked graffiti into the rocks: names, pictures or prayers for safe passage, merit in the afterlife or good luck on the next hunting trip. The desolation around Chilas must have moved many to special fervour, and several sites by the Highway are rich with inscriptions on the 'desert-varnished' stones.

There is a sign to the 'Chilas II' site near the KKH police checkpoint. Just less than a kilometre down a jeep track there is a huge rock covered with hunting and battle scenes and Buddhist stupas. A common image is the long-horned ibex, ancient symbol of fertility and abundance, and an elusive trophy animal even now. On a rocky knoll facing the river are the oldest inscriptions, from the 1st century AD: scenes of conquest and stories of the Buddha's life.

Four kilometres east beside the jeep bridge to Thalpan is the 'Chilas I' site, with art found on both sides of the Highway and the river. The most striking pictures are of a large stupa with banners flying, close to the Highway, and mythical animals, battle scenes, royal lineages and Buddhist tales, across the river on dozens of rocks west of the track.

Details of these and other sites are in two books you might find in Gilgit or Islamabad bookshops: Dr AH Dani's *Human Records on Karakorum Highway* and Dr Karl Jettmar's *Rockcarvings & Inscriptions in the Northern Areas of Pakistan*.

MID-RANGE

Karakurum Inn (☎ 50511; KKH; s/d Rs 550/650; (P)) The air-cooled rooms at the Karakurum Inn are spacious. The **restaurant** (breakfast Rs 110, lunch Rs 190 & dinner Rs 225) has generous set meals of local and Continental dishes. The friendly staff are happy to help foreigners visit the petroglyph sites and Chilas village. While local assistance or advice may not be necessary, it is certainly recommended.

Chilas Inn (☎ 50510; KKH; s/d Rs 800/1200; (P)) The staff here are also very helpful and there's a gift shop in the foyer. The rooms are air cooled and there's a nice surprise in the attached bathrooms – a bathtub. There's a good restaurant and a pleasant garden in which to relax once the sun has retreated.

Panorama Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 50664; KKH; s/d Rs 1050/1300, s/d deluxe Rs 1500/2000; (P)) The Panorama's aspect over the valley is very pleasing and the wire-screened, wide verandas are comfortable vantage points. All rooms are air cooled, and the 10 deluxe rooms have tubs in the bathroom. There is a good **restaurant** (mains Rs 60-150). Try the beef chilli fried rice for Rs 60 or fill up on the tasty chicken *qormaa* (rich, thickened brown curry) for Rs 100.

Shangrila Indus View (☎ 50539; KKH; s/d Rs 895/995, s/d deluxe Rs 1670/2170, s/d VIP Rs 2100/2600; (P)) The budget rooms are overpriced, they lack a view and show wear and tear. The deluxe rooms are rather similar but have wire-screened verandas and a river view. The VIP rooms have mock-traditional décor, double beds and a tub in the bathroom. All rooms are air cooled. The **restaurant** (mains from Rs 150) has Pakistani, Chinese and Continental cuisine.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses (Rs 96) run every few hours between the bus yard and Gilgit's general bus stand. A minibus to Shatial is Rs 55. Local pick-ups will take you from the Chilas bus yard to the KKH for a few rupees, or on to Hodur, Thor or Shatial. Through buses to Rawalpindi pass about four hours after departing Gilgit.

BABUSAR PASS & KAGHAN VALLEY

A Natco 4WD pick-up goes up to Babusar village from near the post office early each morning in summer only. You might be able to hire a jeep to Naran (in the Kaghan Valley) from the bus yard, but a surer way is to hire one in Gilgit. For information about crossing the Babusar Pass, see p271.

CHILAS TO GILGIT

Just over an hour east of Chilas, the Highway crosses the Indus on the Raikot Bridge. From the south side of the bridge a private road has been driven up the mountainside towards the pristine alpine plateau called **Fairy Meadow**, with heart-stopping views up Nanga Parbat's north side, and north to Rakaposhi peak.

The road was built with logging in mind, but subsequent plans for a resort at the meadows (the Shangrila Motel by the bridge

was to be a 'holding pen' for resort guests) got some backs up. Local people, through whose land the road runs, now offer monopoly jeep transport to Tato village and have refused to maintain the road beyond that. For more on trekking in this area, see p358.

Five minutes north of the bridge, the small **Liachar Nala** enters the Indus. In 1841 an earthquake caused an entire valley wall to collapse into the Indus here, damming it up. When the dam broke, a wall of water roared down the canyon, washing away scores of villages and drowning thousands, including an entire Sikh army battalion camped at Attock, almost 500km downstream.

Midway between Chilas and Gilgit (1½ hours from each) is **Talechi** (*ta*-li-chee) village, which has the best views of the largest number of snowy peaks anywhere on the KKH. From the north, the prominent ones are Rakaposhi (7790m; a sharp point above a broad white base), Dobani (6134m; a blunt pyramid), Haramosh (7409m; a series of glaciated ridges) and Nanga Parbat (8125m). Opposite Talechi, **Astor Valley** winds back to Nanga Parbat's sheer south (Rupal) face.

At **Jaglot** (juh-*glote*), 15 minutes north of Talechi, is the bridge and road to Astor Valley. Ten minutes on, the Indus gorge turns east and then south into Baltistan; 10 minutes further on (an hour south of Gilgit), the Skardu road leaves the KKH.

Sleeping & Eating

At Raikot Bridge is the **Shangrila Motel** (☎ 05816-58800; d Rs 1500), an expensive option that is theoretically open from April through to September. Don't count on it being open, though; ring the **Shangrila Indus View** (☎ 05812-50539) in Chilas. Cyclists report bad vibes, not to mention the astronomical rates. Better to pedal 15km north to the beautifully sited **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300) at Talechi. It can be booked through the executive engineer in Chilas or the **chief engineer** (☎ 05811-50307; Khazana Rd) in Gilgit. There are several grotty inns at Jaglot and at least one small hotel with private rooms.

ASTOR VALLEY & NANGA PARBAT

The Nanga Parbat massif is the western anchor of the Great Himalaya. Its south (Rupal) face is a sheer 4500m wall, too steep for snow to stick – hence its name, Urdu for 'Naked Mountain'. The north (Raikot) face steps down 7000m to the Indus. A large number of climbers have been killed trying to scale this mountain.

The hair-raising track beside it, up the Astor Valley and over the Burzil Pass, was the only link between British India and Gilgit until the Babusar Pass was opened in 1892. The India–Pakistan Line of Control has closed the Burzil, but Astor is still the best way to get up close to the mountain. Four-wheel drives regularly fell off the track until it was improved in 1987. It's now wider and safer, but probably no more comfortable.

Astor Valley is about 75% Sunni and 25% Shiite, the latter mainly in the upper tributaries. Everyone speaks Shina and almost nobody speaks English. Some food is available in Astor, but if you're going further or camping, it's a good idea to bring your own.

Jaglot to Astor Village

The spine-wrenching track from Jaglot to the mouth of the valley passes through Bunji, once the Maharaja of Kashmir's local garrison, now headquarters of the Northern Light Infantry (NLI). The lower valley is depressingly grim – barren, slide-prone, oven-like in summer – but grows lovelier as you climb.

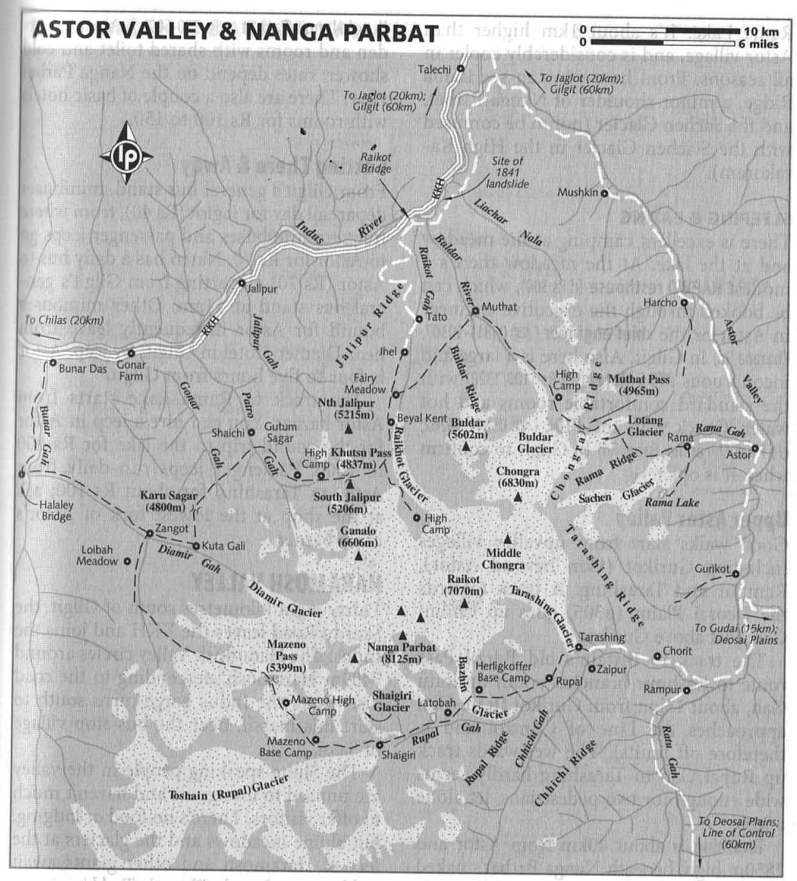
At 2450m **Astor village** is perched like an eagle's nest on both sides of Rama Gah (ravine). The bazaar is up a steep track on the north side of the ravine, and the valley road continues on the south side. The police ask foreigners to register on arrival; the station is in the bazaar. Above the bazaar is the NAPWD executive engineer, where you can book valley resthouses. A post office is across the ravine, near the polo ground.

NANGA PARBAT

An unmistakable feature of the region is massive Nanga Parbat, 8125m high and rising by 7mm every year, faster than almost any other part of the Himalaya chain. The sharpest elevation differences found anywhere on earth are here: almost seven vertical kilometres from the summit into the adjacent Indus gorge, and the mountain's sheer, unbroken 4000m south wall (the Rupal face).

Nanga Parbat sits atop a mass of ancient Indian Plate rocks, sticking oddly northwards into the volcanic-island material of the Kohistan Complex. Its unusual position and growth are still matters of active research; explanations involve the dynamics of the entire Himalayan system.

At Liachar Valley, about 4km upstream from the Raikot Bridge over the Indus (between Gilgit and Chilas), across from the KKH, you can see the grey pre-Cambrian granite of the Indian Plate, hundreds of millions of years old, pushed over on top of river sediments less than 100,000 years old. This reversal is part of the continuing disruption as Nanga Parbat rises.



SLEEPING & EATING

Dreamland Tourist Inn (dm/d Rs 50/250) At the top of the main bazaar, this place has a decent local restaurant and bathrooms with cold shower. There's also a small garden.

Kamran Hotel (d Rs 500) Just down the hill from Dreamland, this mid-range hotel has small comfortable doubles.

On the south side of Rama Gah is an **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300), which can be booked with the executive engineer here or the **chief engineer** (☎ 05811-50307; Khazana Rd) in Gilgit.

Rama Lake

Above Astor village is the steep and very beautiful Rama Gah, with scattered hamlets and thick pine and birch forest. A track starts from Astor Bazaar. In a big meadow two to 2½ hours up, take the left-hand track and walk for an hour past the treeline to

Rama Lake. It's about 1km higher than Astor village, and is considerably cooler in all seasons. From here you can see Rama Ridge, a minor shoulder of Nanga Parbat, and the Sachen Glacier (not to be confused with the Siachen Glacier in the High Karakoram).

SLEEPING & EATING

There is excellent camping at the meadow and at the lake. At the meadow there's a modest **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300), which can be booked through the executive engineer in Astor or the **chief engineer** (☎ 05811-50307; Khazana Rd) in Gilgit. Also here is a large and incongruous **PTDC Motel** (s/d Rs 1100/1320) with the standard comfortable rooms and hot water. Check with the **PTDC** (☎ 05811-54262; c/o PTDC Chinar Inn, Babar Rd) in Gilgit to confirm when it is open.

Upper Astor Valley

Good walks start from upvalley villages including Gurikot (9km beyond Astor), Rampur and Tarashing. A track towards the Deosai Plains (p305) goes up Chilim Gah, just above Gurikot.

The track to Britain's old Burzil Pass route to Kashmir branches south up Ratu Gah, about 15km from Gurikot (Ratu Gah approaches the Line of Control and is therefore off limits). The westwards track up Rupal Gah to Tarashing hardly seems wide enough for two pedestrians, let alone a jeep.

Tarashing is about 40km from Astor and 2850m high, beneath Nanga Parbat's naked Rupal face (though it's not in full view). From here you can day-hike up the moraine (glacial rubble) for a good look at the Rupal face, the Tarashing Glacier, or across the glacier and on up Rupal Gah, or across Rupal Gah to Zaipur village, at the top of which are water channels on huge wooden towers said to be 400 to 500 years old.

See p360 for information on a trek towards the Rupal face. Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush* has further details on these and other treks around Nanga Parbat.

SLEEPING & EATING

At Gudai, 15km up Chilim Gah, there's an **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300), which you must book in Gilgit (see p290). At Tarashing, **Hotel Nanga Parbat** (r Rs 350-500) has a big garden and rooms with shared toilet and cold shower; rates depend on the Nanga Parbat view. There are also a couple of basic hotels with rooms for Rs 100 to 150.

Getting There & Away

From Gilgit's general bus stand, minibuses depart all day for Jaglot (Rs 40), from where frequent minibuses and passenger jeeps go to Astor for Rs 70. Natco has a daily bus to Astor (Rs 70), departing from Gilgit's general bus stand at 11am. Other minibuses bound for Astor infrequently leave from near Diamer Hotel in Gilgit. By jeep, Astor is four to five hours from Gilgit.

The track to Rama Lake starts from Astor bazaar. You can hire a jeep in Astor for the round trip to the lake for Rs 800 to 1000. Passenger jeeps run daily from Astor to Tarashing for about Rs 100; ask at the shop at the lowest fork of Astor's main bazaar.

HARAMOSH VALLEY

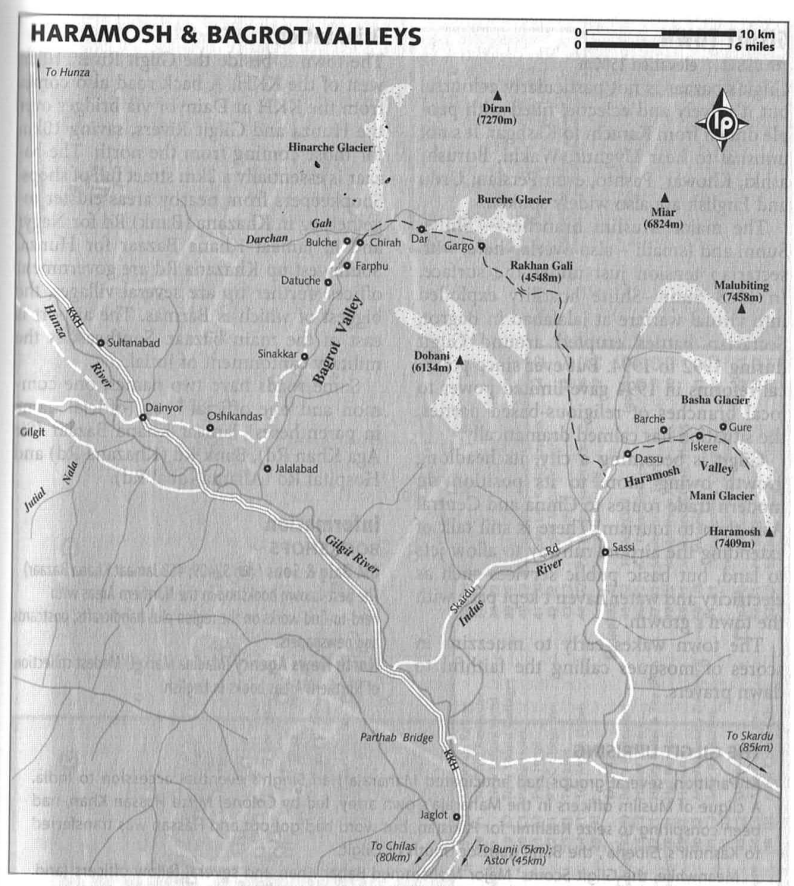
Thirty-eight kilometres south of Gilgit, the Skardu Road leaves the KKH and joins the Indus. The Haramosh Valley circles around 7409m Haramosh, descending to the road just where the Indus gorge turns south to skirt this massif, near the bus-stop village of Sassi.

The Shina-speaking people in the valley are unused to foreigners and haven't much to offer visitors. There's no food or lodging, but alpine meadows and the glaciers at the feet of Haramosh and other giants await trekkers; see Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush* for detail on these and other treks.

There is no accommodation beyond the Highway. Sassi has a café and several seedy roadhouses. Skardu-bound minibuses buses will stop at Sassi.

BAGROT VALLEY

Fifteen kilometres downriver from Gilgit, a broad alluvial fan marks the Bagrot (*bagrote*) Valley. Its lower reaches are like a marbled moonscape, and a ride up the narrow, perched road is unforgettable. The upper valley is huge, rugged and densely cultivated. The Shina-speaking, Shiite Muslim Bagrotis see few foreigners other than passing trekkers.



Oshikandas is a mainly Ismaili village on the road from Gilgit. Across the river is **Jalalabad**. Bagrot's main village is **Sinakkar**, two hours from Gilgit. At the end of the jeep road, 1½ hours on, is the last year-round village, **Chirah**, with a view of Hinarche Glacier and a series of ridges culminating in Diran Peak (7270m). Nagyr is on the other side. The prominent peak to the southeast is 6134m Dobani.

Four to five hours' walking above Chirah is **Dar**, and the same distance on again is **Gargo**. These are 'temporary' villages where a large part of the valley's population migrates with their goats and sheep each summer. Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush* has further detail on these and other treks.

Sleeping

Perched on a ledge up above Chirah, with postcard-perfect views of Diran and the Hinarche Glacier, the basic Bagrote Sarai can be used with prior notice – contact one of the travel agencies in Gilgit Town (p290).

Getting There & Away

From Garhi Bagh in Gilgit, cargo jeeps go in the early morning to Chirah via Dainyor in under an hour. A better bet is to go by Suzuki to Dainyor, where you can easily pick up a 'special' taxi to Chirah (Rs 50 to 100). Avoid jeeps to Sinakkar, which isn't far enough. **Travel Walji's** (☎ 52665; www.waljis.com; Airport Rd) in Gilgit organises overnight trips and local hikes around the valley.

GILGIT TOWN

☎ 05811 / elevation 1500m

Gilgit's bazaar is not particularly colourful but it's lively and eclectic, filled with people drawn from Karachi to Kashgar. It's not unusual to hear Uyghur, Wakhi, Burushashki, Khowar, Pashto, even Persian; Urdu and English are also widely spoken.

The major Muslim branches – Shiite, Sunni and Ismaili – also overlap here, with sectarian tension just under the surface. In 1988 Sunni–Shiite hostility exploded into virtual warfare at Jalalabad in Bagrot. Sectarian battles erupted around Gilgit during 1992 to 1994. But ever since political reforms in 1994 gave limited power to local branches of religious-based parties, the situation has calmed dramatically.

Gilgit is becoming a city, its headlong growth owing more to its position on modern trade routes to China and Central Asia than to tourism. There is still talk of extending the airport runway to allow jets to land, but basic public services such as electricity and water haven't kept pace with the town's growth.

The town wakes early to muezzins in scores of mosques calling the faithful to dawn prayers.

Orientation

The town is beside the Gilgit River, 10km west of the KKH. A back road also comes from the KKH at Dainyor via bridges over the Hunza and Gilgit Rivers, saving 10km for those coming from the north. The bazaar is essentially a 2km street full of shops. Shopkeepers from nearby areas cluster together, eg in Khazana (Bank) Rd for Nagyr and in Jamaat Khana Bazaar for Hunza. Southwest up Khazana Rd are government offices; further up are several villages, the biggest of which is Barmas. The airport is east of the main bazaar. Southeast is the military cantonment of Jutial.

Some roads have two names, one common and one official – eg (official name in parentheses) Jamaat Khana Bazaar (Sir Aga Khan Rd), Bank Rd (Khazana Rd) and Hospital Rd (Allama Iqbal Rd).

Information

BOOKSHOPS

GM Baig & Sons (☎ 52409; 468 Jamaat Khana Bazaar) The best-known bookshop in the Northern Areas with hard-to-find works on the region plus handicrafts, postcards and newspapers.

North News Agency (Madina Market) Modest collection of Northern Areas books in English.

THE GILGIT UPRISING

At Partition, several groups had anticipated Maharaja Hari Singh's eventual accession to India. A clique of Muslim officers in the Maharaja's own army, led by Colonel Mirza Hassan Khan, had been conspiring to seize Kashmir for Pakistan, but word had got out and Hassan was transferred to Kashmir's 'Siberia', the Bunji garrison south of Gilgit.

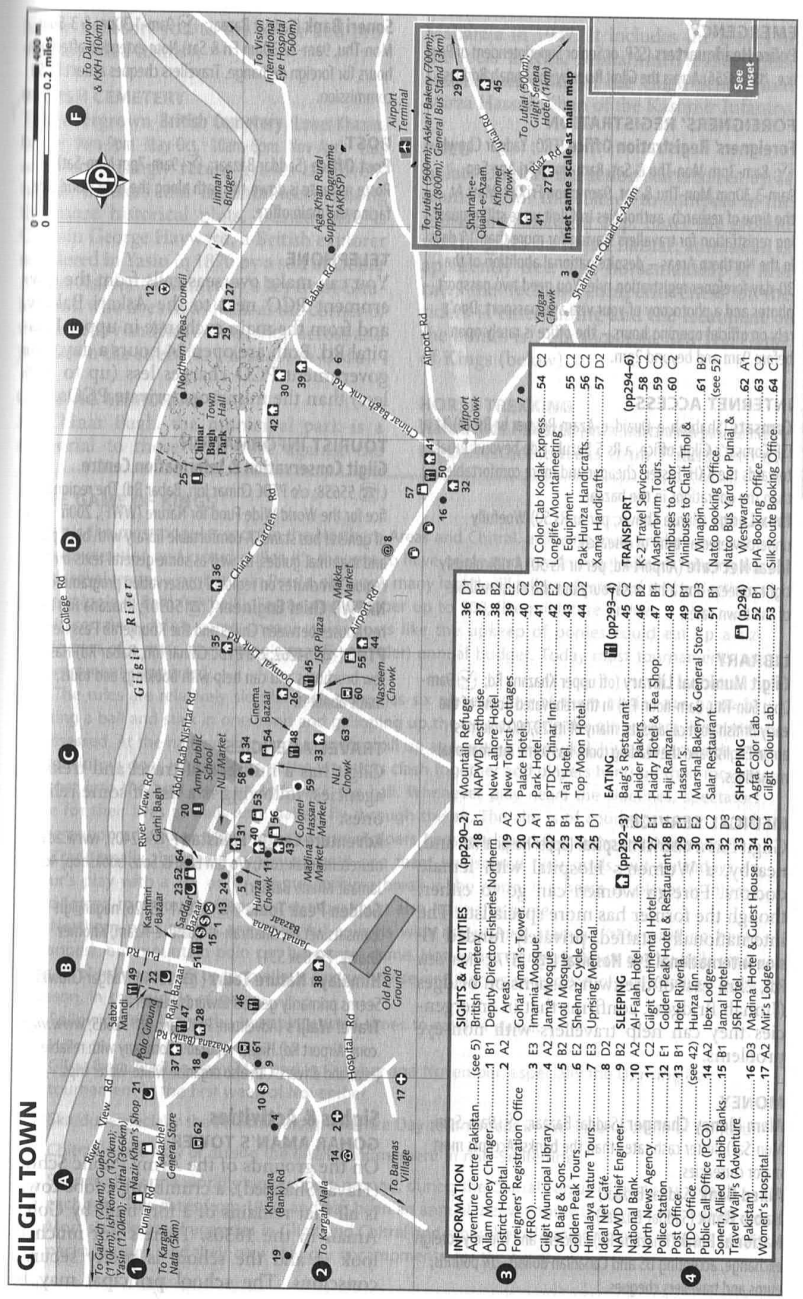
Meanwhile, the Gilgit Scouts' Major Mohammed Babar Khan and several fellow officers (and, according to some, their British commander) had hatched their own rebellion.

Within days of the Maharaja's decision, a mob gathered in Gilgit from neighbouring valleys. The governor called Bunji for help, and who should be among the reinforcements but Colonel Hassan. On 1 November Babar Khan arrested Governor Ghansar Singh and the rebels asked to join Pakistan.

Within a few days, the Scouts, and Muslim soldiers of the Kashmiri army, joined the war with India. In the following months the Scouts took Baltistan, and Hassan got to the outskirts of Srinagar.

The fledgling Indian air force at one point bombed Gilgit, no easy task in the narrow valleys. Gilgitis like to tell the story of the Scouts' pipe band, which mocked the Indian pilots by defiantly tootling up and down the airfield the whole time.

Memories of the 'Uprising' are still alive in Gilgit. Hassan, Babar and another leader of the Gilgit Scouts, Maj Safiullah Beg, are buried in the town's maple-shaded municipal park, Chinar Bagh, and many of their offspring are local politicians and entrepreneurs. Of course it's not 14 August but 1 November that Gilgit celebrates as Independence Day, with spontaneous music and dancing and a week-long polo tournament. One of the best polo teams every year is from the Gilgit garrison of the Northern Light Infantry (NLI), successor to the Gilgit Scouts.



EMERGENCY

Police Headquarters (SSP, or Senior Superintendent of Police; ☎ 53356) Across the Gilgit River by the Jinnah Bridges.

FOREIGNERS' REGISTRATION

Foreigners' Registration Office (FRO; Yadgar Chowk; ⏲ 8am-3pm Mon-Thu & Sat, 8am-noon Fri Apr-Sep, 9am-3.30pm Mon-Thu & Sat, 9am-noon Fri Oct-Mar) At the time of research, authorities in Gilgit were still requesting registration for travellers staying for more than 15 days in the Northern Areas – despite national abolition of the 30-day foreigner registration rule. You need two passport photos and a photocopy of your visa and passport. Don't rely on official opening hours – the office is rarely open before 9am and beyond 2pm.

INTERNET ACCESS

Comsats (Shahrah-e-Quaid-e-Azam Rd; per hr Rs 40) At ISP Comsat's Gilgit office, a Rs 5 Suzuki ride beyond Jutial towards the KKH. Faster, cheaper and more comfortable than the operations in the bazaar.

Ibex Lodge (Hunza Chowk; per hr Rs 50) Woefully underpowered at time of research.

Ideal Net Cafe (Airport Rd; per hr Rs 50) A ridiculously tight squeeze and a bit unsavoury but the most reliable of the town cafés.

LIBRARY

Gilgit Municipal Library (off upper Khazana Rd; ⏲ 9am-2pm Sun-Thu, 8am-noon Fri) In the renovated home of the early British political agents, many of its 20,000 volumes are in English and the reading room has some international magazines.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Gilgit has a **district hospital** (upper Hospital Rd) and, nearby, a Women's Hospital with female doctors. Foreign women can go to either, though the former has more specialists. The internationally staffed, privately funded **Vision International Eye Hospital** (☎ 55778; River View Rd), 2km east of the twin suspension bridges (Jinnah Bridges), confirms that in emergencies they can help travellers with non-eye problems.

MONEY

Alam Money Changer (Saddar Bazaar; ⏲ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Better cash rates than the banks. Accepts most major currencies.

Allied Bank (Saddar Bazaar)

Habib Bank (Saddar Bazaar)

National Bank (Khazana Rd) Efficient and friendly foreign exchange, accepting US and Canadian dollars, UK pounds, euros and travellers cheques.

Soneri Bank (Saddar Bazaar; ⏲ 9am-1.30pm & 3-5pm Mon-Thu, 9am-12.30pm Fri & Sat) Note extended afternoon hours for foreign exchange. Travellers cheques attract Rs 50 commission.

POST

Post Office (Saddar Bazaar; ⏲ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) Poste restante is down the path along the right-hand side facing the main office.

TELEPHONE

You can make overseas calls from the government PCO next to the Askari Bakery, and from the main exchange in upper Hospital Rd. Both are open 24 hours a day. The government PCO charges less (up to 30% less) than the numerous private PCOs.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Gilgit Conservation & Information Centre (☎ 55658; c/o PTDC Chinar Inn, Babar Rd) The regional office for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), 200m west of general bus stand. A comfortable library with bird, plant and mammal guides, as well as some general texts on the region. Brochures on regional conservation programmes.

NAPWD Chief Engineer (☎ 50307; Khazana Rd) Book resthouses between Chilas and the Khunjerab Pass here.

PTDC (☎ 54262; c/o PTDC Chinar Inn, Babar Rd) Has a few brochures and can help with bookings and tours, but that's about it.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Gilgit has a number of travel and trekking agencies; following is a list of some reliable ones.

Adventure Center Pakistan (☎ 52409; www.adventurecenterpak.com; c/o GM Baig & Sons bookshop, 468 Jamaat Khana Bazaar)

Golden Peak Tours (☎ 05811-55726; nagar@glt.comsats.net.pk; Shahrah-e-Quaid-e-Azam, Khomer Chowk, PO Box 531)

Himalaya Nature Tours (☎ 52946; Yadgar Chowk) Seems primarily geared towards hunters.

Travel Walji's (Adventure Pakistan; ☎ 52665; www.waljis.com; Airport Rd) Highly reputable company with reliable jeeps and drivers. Can also organise white-water trips.

Sights & Activities

GOHAR AMAN'S TOWER

On the grounds of the Army Public School (Hayat Shaheed), a crumbling adobe tower is all that remains of a fort built by Gohar Aman in the 1850s. There's not much to look at and the school is pretty security conscious. The school principal may be happy to escort you to the tower and provide a potted history.

BRITISH CEMETERY

This overgrown **British Cemetery** (Lower Khazana Rd; ⏲ 9am-9pm May-Oct, 10am-6pm Nov-Apr) has some surprisingly recent graves of adventurous trekkers and mountaineers among the more historical plots. Buried here is Captain George Hayward, a British explorer murdered in Yasin in 1870 by a son of Gohar Aman. Ask for the cemetery's key from Ghulam Ali, who lives in a shack at the corner of the cemetery and has a cloth shop across and just down the street (key is *chabi* in Urdu).

UPRISING MEMORIAL

By Chinar Bagh, the municipal park is a memorial to those who rose against the Maharaja in 1947. It includes the graves of the local heroes, Mohammed Babar Khan and Safiullah Beg of the Gilgit Scouts, and Mirza Hassan Khan of the Kashmir Infantry.

POLO

In late October the action starts to hot up as teams vie for the chance to compete in the prestigious Shandur cup. Enter the ground via the gates on Rajah Bazaar; admission is apparently free. The horsemanship is first rate, the reckless competitiveness of the riders is entertaining and the treatment of the horses is…questionable. See The Game of Kings (below).

HORSE TREKKING

Walk & Ride Pakistan (www.walkandridepakistan.com) organises horse treks from Phander to the

THE GAME OF KINGS

Polo is the most popular sport in the Northern Areas and Chitral, eclipsing even cricket as a topic of conversation and crowd-puller. It's thought to have originated as a form of military training for elite royal troops – probably in Persia, although many locals will tell you it started in the Northern Areas (*polo* is Balti for 'ball'). Teams may number up to 100, like miniature armies.

It certainly didn't come cheap; major costs like the upkeep of ponies could eat up a sizable part of a *mir's* (the region's traditional ruler) annual budget. Today most tournaments are government-supported.

The rules are relatively simple. Each team has six players. One of them begins the game by taking a ball and stick in one hand and galloping up the field towards the other team like a man possessed. At the halfway line he throws the ball up and, with a bit of skill, hits it far towards the opposition's goal. Horses foam at the bit, sticks clash together and players hang off their mounts to get into the best position to smack the ball. Whenever play nears the sidelines, spectators flee for their lives as balls and mallets fly through the air. The aim is of course to score a goal, whereupon a band of drummers and *surnai* pipers goes mad, and the teams change ends.

Traditionally the game continues until one team has scored nine goals, but nowadays an hour's play with a 10- or 15-minute halftime break is the norm. If a horse or player is injured and forced to retire, his opposite number must also leave the game.

Northern polo ponies are beautiful animals with astonishing stamina (there are no horse changes), but mountain polo can be a cruel game. Horses are routinely hit or cut by balls moving at blinding speed, or by mallets. Apparently several horses drop dead of heart failure every season, in the middle of games.

Following is a list of the best places and times to catch a game:

- Gilgit from April to early May and in October and November, especially the Uprising Day tournament in the first week of November.
- Skardu, especially the Pakistan Independence Day tournament in the second week of August.
- Chitral in late May or during the district tournament in mid-September.
- Shandur Pass, the world's highest polo ground, during the Chitral versus Gilgit tournament each July. This dates from 1936, and has been an annual, heavily touristed event since 1989. Most sizable travel agencies in Gilgit and Chitral and a number of national agencies now have package tours, and their own Shandur encampments, for the event.

Shandur Pass for the polo tournament, as well as through the Charpursan Valley in Gojal. Make inquiries at **Madina Hotel & Guest House** (☎ 52457; NLI Chowk).

FISHING

The office of the **Deputy Director Fisheries Northern Areas** (☎ 0277), on the Napur village road, issues a foreigners' fishing licence (US$10 per day, US$30 per week, US$160 per month). There were no official foreigners' fees for the archaic fishing gear available for hire.

Sleeping

BUDGET

In this range, most rooms have private toilets (some with sit-down toilets) and private showers with hot water running in the morning and evening. Many also have gardens where you can pitch a tent.

Madina Hotel & Guest House (☎ 52457; NLI Chowk; dm/s/d Rs 100/150-200/200-250) Still the travellers' favourite, with friendly helpful staff. Rooms vary but all are kept clean. There's a restaurant and inhouse help with onward transport, tours and trekking. The food can be good when the owner, who is a good cook, is in town; otherwise it's still wholesome and fresh, but boring.

Mountain Refuge (☎ 53683; Chinar Garden Rd; dm/s/d/tr Rs 50/150/200/250) Rightly popular with travellers. It's in a quiet location and encompasses a peaceful shady garden where you can camp for Rs 50. The rooms are set around the garden; the doubles have private bathrooms with hot water. There's a good restaurant with local and Hunza dishes.

New Tourist Cottages (☎ 54255; Chinar Bagh Link Rd; dm/s/d Rs 80/150/250) Run by a friendly Japanese lady, the rooms here are very clean and the attached bathrooms with hot water are immense. Some may find the very steep stairs to the rooms a little difficult. Yes, there is Japanese food (see Eating p293).

Horizon Guest House (☎ 55017; Jutial Rd; s/d Rs 100/200) The Horizon's rooms are rather neglected with cold water showers and not a great location. But it has a friendly owner, pleasant garden and good food from the kitchen, which will supply bucket hot water.

Hunza Inn (☎ 53814; Chinar Garden Rd; dm/s/d with shared cold shower Rs 50/100/100, s/d with hot shower Rs 400/500; (P)) This friendly though run-down inn has OK rooms in a quiet location, and can provide guide and transport services. The shared bathrooms have only cold-water showers.

JSR Hotel (☎ 52308; JSR Plaza; dm/s/d Rs 80/150/250) The friendly JSR is not a bad budget choice, with basic but clean rooms.

Ibex Lodge (☎ 52334; NLI Rd; s/d/tr Rs 100/250/400; (💻)) Has grotty shadeless singles with shared facilities and doubles and triples. The restaurant is fairly ordinary, but the outdoor charpoys have a certain charm. The Internet facilities here are not the best in town.

Golden Peak Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 54839; Khazana Rd; dm/s/d Rs 80/150/250) The ramshackle Golden Peak occupies the garden and old summer house of the *mir* (traditional ruler) of Nagyr. The private bathrooms have hot water; those in the old wing have sit-down toilets. All could do with a clean.

Top Moon Hotel (☎ 53828; Airport Rd; s/d Rs 150/200) The very basic rooms in this hotel have private bathrooms, but the hot water may still be turned off in October.

NAPWD resthouse (cnr Khazana & Punial Rds) This is comfortable but its Rs 300 doubles are usually booked out in summer; check with the chief engineer's office on Khazana Rd.

Al-Falah Hotel (☎ 53447; Domyal Link Rd; s/d/tr/quad Rs 100/150/200/400) A desperate choice. Miserable rooms with small attached toilet. No shower, no hot water.

New Lahore Hotel (☎ 54869; Lower Hospital Rd; s/d/tr Rs 100/200/150) There's no English sign to this cheapie. Rooms are grotty, though you can camp in the garden for Rs 60.

MID-RANGE

Hotels in this range have some rooms with attached sit-down toilets and hot showers.

North Inn (☎ 55545; Khomer Chowk; s/d/tr Rs 250/350/400) Travellers give high marks to the North Inn for friendly assistance. There is a good rumour book, though like most of these on the KKH, the number of entries falls away dramatically after September 2001. Cheaper rooms are available downstairs – make an offer. Management warns prices will rise if/when satellite TV gets installed!

Gilgit Continental Hotel (☎ 53569; River View Rd; s/d Rs 600/800; (P)) Nicely located by the river, and the spacious rooms are clean, cool and comfortable and some have river views. There is a restaurant and rooftop barbecues accompanied by local live music in summer.

Hotel Riveria (☎ 54184; River View Rd; s/d Rs 600/800; (P)) Also by the river, this is an older sibling of Gilgit Continental. The rooms are slightly smaller and show their age, but it is still very comfortable and the manicured gardens are a perfect peaceful retreat.

Jamal Hotel (☎ 53788; Airport Rd; s/d Rs 350/450; (P)) The tidy rooms are OK value and the Chinese restaurant here is one of the best in Gilgit.

Taj Hotel (☎ 53716; Madina Market; s/d/tr Rs 300/400/450) The Taj has been recommended by travellers. Rooms in this central hotel are adequately clean and the staff friendly. There's also a good restaurant.

Palace Hotel (☎ 52266; Madina Market; s/d Rs 300/400, s/d VIP Rs 800/1000) The sweeping marble staircase does not foretell of sumptuous luxury beyond. This hotel has deteriorated rapidly and some rooms are the worse for wear and smoke. The spacious VIP rooms feature a fridge and TV.

PTDC Chinar Inn (☎ 54262; Chinar Garden Rd; s/d Rs 1260/1650, s/d deluxe Rs 1650/1980; (P)) In a quiet location and has big, comfy rooms with fan. There's a restaurant and information desk.

Rupal Inn (☎ 55848; Jutial Rd; s/d Rs 900/1300; (P)) A large, comfortable hotel clearly designed for tour groups. Not a convenient location, but the rooms are very nice and there's a restaurant with Pakistani, Chinese and Continental dishes.

Mir's Lodge (☎ 52875; Domyal Link Rd; s/d with TV Rs 900/1200, s/d without TV Rs 550/750; (P)) The TV-equipped rooms are downstairs and so cooler in summer, and some have double beds. All rooms have a telephone. There's a decent restaurant.

Gilgit Gateway Hotel (☎ 55014; Riaz Rd; s/d Rs 400/600) The comfortable rooms are OK but the rest of the hotel is noticeably grotty and neglected and it is not in a great location.

Park Hotel (☎ 52379; Airport Rd; s/d Rs 300/500, s/d deluxe Rs 450/700; (P)) The rooms are well kept and spacious, though the standard rooms in the old wing are a bit gloomy.

TOP END

Gilgit Serena Hotel (☎ 55894; fax 55900; Jutial; s/d Rs 3500/4000; (P) (✕) (💻)) Wonderfully sited above town and giving views across the valley to Dumani and Rakaposhi peaks, Gilgit Serena is the best hotel in town. The comfortable rooms have TV, phone and views. The service is excellent and there is a free shuttle bus for guests visiting the bazaar or catching a flight from the airport. There's an excellent restaurant (Dumani) and nightly barbecues in the garden that are of interest to nonguests (see Eating, below).

Eating

RESTAURANTS

The most reliable (in terms of hygiene) restaurants are in the popular hotels where you will tire of seeing the usual suspects – Pakistani, Chinese and Continental – on the menu.

Dumani (Jutial; mains Rs 200-400, outdoor barbecue Rs 350, high tea Rs 150) Based at Gilgit Serena Hotel, Dumani has a wonderful vista and a good-value menu with tasty Pakistani, Chinese and Continental cuisine. There are all-you-can-eat buffet lunches (Rs 340), but only on days when there are sufficient guests staying at the hotel. The Monday- to Saturday-night barbecue is very popular, with many nonguests enjoying the food and garden ambience. Also good value is the high tea buffet on Sunday (3pm to 6pm) with salads, hot dishes and desserts from which to choose.

Haji Ramzan (near NLI Chowk) This frenetic and bright restaurant is cleaner than most and serves a good range of local curries, kebabs, rice and naan. Try the mutton curry (Rs 50), chicken *karai* (Rs 120) and *chapli kebabs* (Rs 25).

Green Dragon (Airport Rd; mains Rs 40-200) Jamal Hotel's restaurant produces OK Chinese dishes such as chilli chicken (Rs 75) and vegetable fried rice (Rs 40), but covers its bases by churning out Pakistani standards such as chicken *karai* (Rs 135) and chicken *jalfrezi* (chicken stir-fried with tomatoes and chillies; Rs 75).

Salar Restaurant (Saddar Bazaar; mains Rs 30-160) Has Pakistani standards and interesting 'Chinese' items – eg *mantou* (steamed buns) and strange but tasty fried noodles – in clean, low-key surroundings.

Baig's Restaurant (Airport Rd; mains Rs 35-160) Opposite JSR Plaza, gloomy but relatively clean, with good oily Pakistani dishes.

New Tourist Cottages (☎ 54255; Chinar Bagh Link Rd; set Japanese dinner Rs 130) Nonguests can reserve a spot at the table by ringing to book before 4pm.

Mountain Refuge (☎ 53683; Chinar Garden Rd; Hunza-style dinner Rs 85) This genuine local eatery serves fresh noodle soup (Rs 25) and Hunza *pitti* (whole-wheat bread; Rs 80).

Horizon Guest House (☎ 55017; Shahrah-e-Quaid-Azam Rd; mains Rs 50-100) You can ask the kitchen here to cook up good vegetarian dishes.

Other recommended hotel restaurants include those at **Hotel Riveria** (☎ 54184; River View Rd; mains Rs 65-155), with chicken *jalfrezi* for Rs 105 and chilli beef with fried rice for Rs 75, and **Mir's Lodge** (☎ 52875; Domyal Link Rd, mains Rs 75-195), serving beef Manchurian for Rs 100, roast chicken with French fries for Rs 95 and chicken shashlik with rice for Rs 135.

CAFÉS & QUICK EATS

Askari Bakery (Jutial Rd; ⏲ 8am-2pm & 4-10pm) Catch a Rs 5 Suzuki out to Askari Bakery beyond Jutial for good-value cakes, biscuits and bread. Try the delicious walnut cake (Rs 60) or plain butter cakes (Rs 12 for 250g). The bakery shares its location with a good hot snack café (see Askari Snacks, following), a supermarket and the government PCO.

Askari Snacks (Jutial Rd) You can grab a coffee or tea here and sit in the garden with limited shade and enjoy your bakery items. (Note there is not a toilet in the vicinity.) Coffees are Rs 15, samosas Rs 3 and kebabs Rs 20.

SELF-CATERING

Stands on Airport Rd and on the approach to the footbridge on Pul Rd sell fruit and vegetables, especially in the evening. A *sabzi mandi* (vegetable market) is along the west side of Jama Mosque. Apricots usually appear in June. Apples, pomegranates, walnuts and Gilgit's own peaches can be found in early autumn. Fresh naan is sold right from the *tandoor* (clay oven) in the *sabzi mandi* and elsewhere, but it's gone soon after 9am and is available again in the evenings.

Numerous bakeries and general stores have biscuits, sweets, jam, cornflakes, soup mixes, long-life milk and tinned processed cheese. **Marshal Bakery & General Store** (Airport Rd) is particularly good. **Haider Bakers** (Shaheed-e-Millat Rd) has a small range of cakes and biscuits of indeterminable age, but a good range of grocery items. Askari Bakery (see Cafés & Quick Eats, above) has a better, fresher range. There's a large **CSD supermarket** behind Askari Bakery.

You can buy *dahee* (yogurt) at general stores, or try one of the older yogurt shops such as **Hassan's**, at the back of the *sabzi mandi*; say *pita* for drink here and *jata* for takeaway.

Drinking

In an alley off Rajah Bazaar, around the corner from Khazana Rd, **Haidry Hotal & Tea Shop** is a tiny one-man operation serving fresh black tea with milk, sugar, cardamom and ginger in meticulously washed glasses for Rs 2. There is no alcohol available, even in top-end hotels.

Shopping

FILM & PHOTOGRAPHY

Colour labs here sell and process print and E6 films and take passport photos.

Agfa Color Lab (Saddar Bazaar)
Gilgit Colour Lab (Cinema Bazaar)
JJ Color Lab Kodak Express (NLI Chowk)

CAMPING EQUIPMENT SALES & RENTAL

Adventure Center Pakistan (☎ 52409; Baig Bookshop, Jamaat Khana Bazaar)
Himalaya Nature Tours (☎ 52946; Yadgar Chowk)
Longlife Mountaineering Equipment (☎ 53513; Airport Rd) Sales and rental. Sleeping-bag hire is Rs 40 per day. Sold items may be bought back at half price. Reasonable selection: down jackets, stoves and other expedition leftovers.
Trekking Equipment & Gift Shop (☎ 52457; c/o Madina Hotel & Guest House, NLI Chowk)

HANDICRAFTS

Pak Hunza Handicrafts (7 Madina Market) Gilgit's oldest handicrafts shop is honest Pak Hunza. This and a clutch of shops around Hunza Chowk are full of gemstones, old musical instruments, hats (Rs 60 to 200), waistcoats (Rs 200 to 300) and wool by the yard. A Northern Areas bargain is the durable, hand-woven wool *(patti* or *pattu)* of Hunza and Nagyr – coarse, thick and tight, with an uneven grain.

Xama Handicrafts (Airport Rd) By the Park Hotel, Xama has a good collection of old jewellery, silver, carpets and flintlocks.

Getting There & Away

AIR

PIA (☎ 50348; Domyal Link Rd) also has an office at the **airport** (☎ 50354). There are two flights to/from Islamabad each day, weather permitting. The cost is Rs 1650 one way and the waiting list can get very long in poor weather. Be sure to follow the instructions outlined at the PIA office. It's very important to check/confirm one hour before flight at the airport office or you won't be on the manifest.

BUS & MINIBUS

The general bus stand is located well out of town near the intersection with the KKH. Most long-distance buses terminate here. Catch a taxi (Rs 30 to 50) or a Suzuki (Rs 5) to/from town. There are several companies operating from here, some with booking offices in town.

K-2 Travel Services (☎ 52370) Office just outside the gate of the Madina Hotel & Guest House as well as at the general bus stand.
Mashabrum Tours (☎ 52784, 53095) NLI Chowk and general bus stand.
Natco (☎ 50435, 53381) There's a friendly office next to the Agfa Color Lab in Saddar Bazaar and a not-so-friendly office at the general bus stand.
Silk Route Transport Company (☎ 55234) Saddar Bazaar and general bus stand.
Tais Transport Service (☎ 55774) A 24-hour operation at the general bus stand that launches heavily loaded minibuses up the KKH to Hunza, Nagyr and Gojal.

Chitral, Punial, Ishkoman, Yasin & Ghizar

Yaqub of Gupis travels to/from Chitral (about Rs 8000 for up to four passengers) via the Shandur Pass and can be contacted at Madina Hotel & Guest House. Natco buses and Land Cruisers leave from the **Natco bus yard** (Punial Rd). Natco fares for Chitral and destinations west of Gilgit include the following:

Chitral (Rs 600, 16 hours) Ten-seat Land Cruiser at least once a week, usually Sunday.
Gakuch (Rs 50) On the Yasin or Gupis bus.
Gupis (Rs 80) Departure 10am.
Ishkoman (Rs 70) Departure 11am.
Yasin (bus Rs 70, minibus Rs 100) Departures 8am (bus) and 9am (minibus).

Hunza, Nagyr & Gojal

From the general bus stand, Tais Transport Service minibuses depart from 7am, stopping at Karimabad (Rs 70), Gulmit (Rs 100), Passu (Rs 110) and Sost (Rs 135, five hours). Natco has one bus daily to Aliabad (Rs 50, departing 7am), a short distance from Karimabad.

Rawalpindi

From the general bus stand, buses (usually air-con buses) bound for Rawalpindi can take anything from 12 to 18 hours. Most terminate at the chaotic Pir Wadai bus stand.

K-2 Travel Services (Rs 565) Daily departures 8am, noon and 7pm.
Mashabrum Tours (Rs 565) Daily departures midnight (minibus), 2am, 4am, 6am and 8am.
Natco (Rs 515) Daily departures 1pm, 3pm (air-con), 5pm and 7pm (air-con).

Skardu

From the general bus stand, minibuses take about six hours. Try to get a window seat on the right-hand side (going to Skardu) for heart-stopping views.

K-2 Travel Services (Rs 200, six hours) Four departures daily from 7am.
Mashabrum Tours (Rs 200) Five minibus departures 7am, 8am, 10am, noon and 1pm.
Natco (Rs 200) Two departures daily 8am (bus) and noon (minibus).

Other Destinations & Options

Private transport (usually jeeps but some minibuses) departs from where people from outlying areas have their shops, eg Jamaat Khana Bazaar for Hunza, lower Khazana Rd for Nagyr, Garhi Bagh for Haramosh and Bagrot, and Punial Rd for the upper Gilgit River basin. There are minibuses to Chalt/Minapin leaving from near the corner of Shaheed-e-Millat and Khazana Rds after noon. Natco has a daily minibus (Rs 70, 11am) to Astor Village.

FOUR-WHEEL DRIVE RENTAL

For jeep or minibus rental, ask the travel agencies (see p290), or your hotel-wallah. At the time of research, you could hire a Land Cruiser one way to Skardu or Sost for about Rs 5000.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Cheapest is a passenger Suzuki to Airport Chowk (Rs 5), plus a 10-minute walk to the airport from there. A hired Suzuki is Rs 30. Several hotels have free airport transfers.

BICYCLE

Himalaya Nature Tours (☎ 52946; Yadgar Chowk) Rents mountain bikes.

Shehnaz Cycle Co (☎ 50913; Hunza Chowk; mountain bikes per day Rs 3000)

PASSENGER SUZUKIS

For Rs 5, passenger Suzukis go to Jutial and the general bus stand from in front of the GPO, and to Dainyor from the east end of Garhi Bagh. They can be flagged down anywhere, but not beyond 9pm. Suzukis also run west from Punial Rd.

AROUND GILGIT

Kargah Buddha & Kargah Nala

A Buddhist survivor is the large standing Buddha carved on a cliff face in Kargah Nala, west of Gilgit. It may date from the 7th century. From Punial Rd, it's a 5km hike. Alternatively, you can jump off a minibus to Baseen (Rs 10) or hire a Suzuki for a three-hour return trip (Rs 300). A 10-minute walk up the left-hand side of Kargah Nala is Shuko Gah (Gah is Shina for 'stream'), and the Buddha is high above this gully. Local kids may 'guide' you there, but be careful – their short cuts can include difficult scrambles.

Further up Shuko Gah is Napur village, the ruins of a monastery and stupa, and a cave where Buddhist birch-bark texts (now called the Gilgit Manuscripts) were found in the 1930s. Cave is *kor* in Shina. A return option with good valley views is to continue on this high path to Barmas village, and then back down into Gilgit.

Jutial Nala & Taj Mughal's Monument

A fairly easy hike from Jutial along a high water channel gives a fine panorama of the valley, plus Rakaposhi and other peaks. Take a Jutial Suzuki from Saddar Bazaar to the end of the line, below Gilgit Serena Hotel. Half a kilometre uphill past Gilgit Serena, turn right and then left up the nala. Climb till you see a stream going off to the right – the headworks of the water channel.

Several kilometres along the channel, you can scramble 100m up to Taj Mughal's monument. At Barmas village, near some water tanks, descend Hospital Rd into Gilgit. The hike from Gilgit Serena Hotel to the bazaar takes under two hours. A variation is to climb into Jutial Nala, then two hours up to pine forests and excellent Rakaposhi views. Another is to continue on the channel to Napur and the Kargah Buddha.

These walks are hot in July and August. If there have been more than a few hours of rain in recent days, stay away: the hillsides are very prone to rockslides.

Dainyor

A 'suburb' of Gilgit and perhaps Pakistan's southernmost Ismaili village, Dainyor makes a good day trip. From Saddar Bazaar, Suzukis go to Dainyor Bazaar on the KKH via two dramatic suspension bridges.

Overlooking the Hunza River is a shrine to a 17th- or 18th-century Shiite preacher named Sultan Alib. Get off the Suzuki when it tops the climb on the east side of the Hunza River, doubling back by foot on a path above the road.

From Dainyor Bazaar it's 1.5km south on the KKH to a melancholy cemetery (on the left behind a large gate) with the graves of Chinese KKH workers.

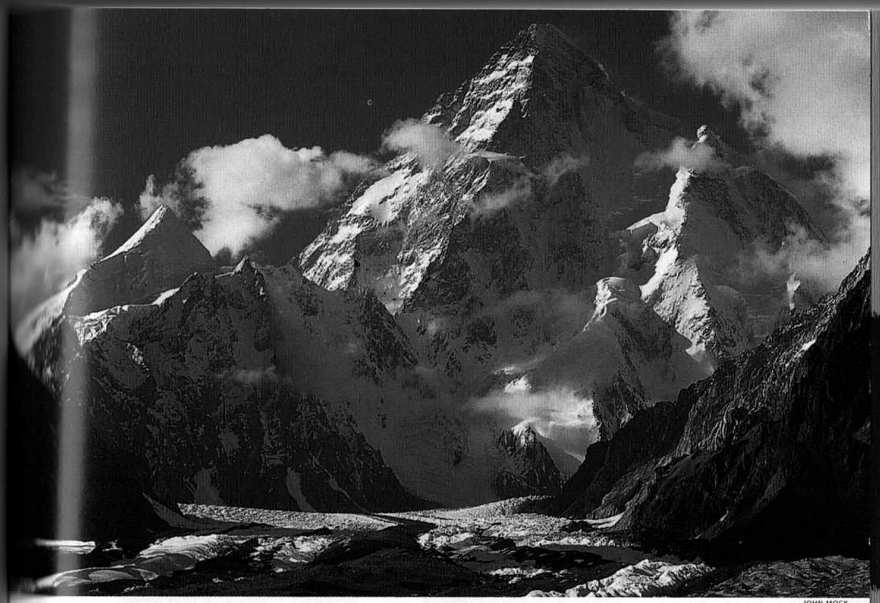
There is a rock in Dainyor village with Sanskrit inscriptions about 7th- and 8th-century Tibetan rulers. It's on the property of one Rafidullah, who'll show it to visitors for a few rupees. From the bazaar, go 1km north on the KKH to a jeep road on the right. Up the road, just less than a kilometre, Rafidullah's house is on the left. If you get lost ask for 'old writing stone' – *likitu giri* in Shina.

NALTAR VALLEY

Naltar was the Gilgit Agency's hill station, where the British administrators retreated when summer heat grew oppressive. Most of the guides who know the valleys around Gilgit call this one the loveliest. Its picture-perfect alpine scenery is accessible for overnight trips, or even a fast day trip by jeep from Gilgit, and it gets crowded in summer.

The valley meets the Hunza River at Nomal, 25km north of Gilgit. A jeep road climbs a stony canyon beside the Naltar River, 7km to 8km to Lower Naltar village (*kilini Naltar* in Shina, the local speech), and 6km to 7km more to *ajini Naltar* (Upper Naltar) at about 3000m. Here the valley opens out and begins to look alpine. Across the river is a Pakistan Air Force winter survival school.

From Upper Naltar, it's a beautiful 12km hike on a bad jeep road up to Naltar Lake and dense pine forests. No guide is necessary. Beyond this are more pastures and



JOHN MOCK

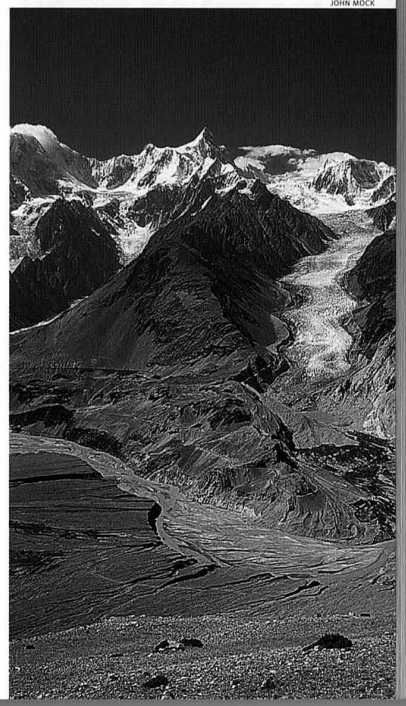
K2 (8611m), Baltoro Glacier trek (p372), Baltistan

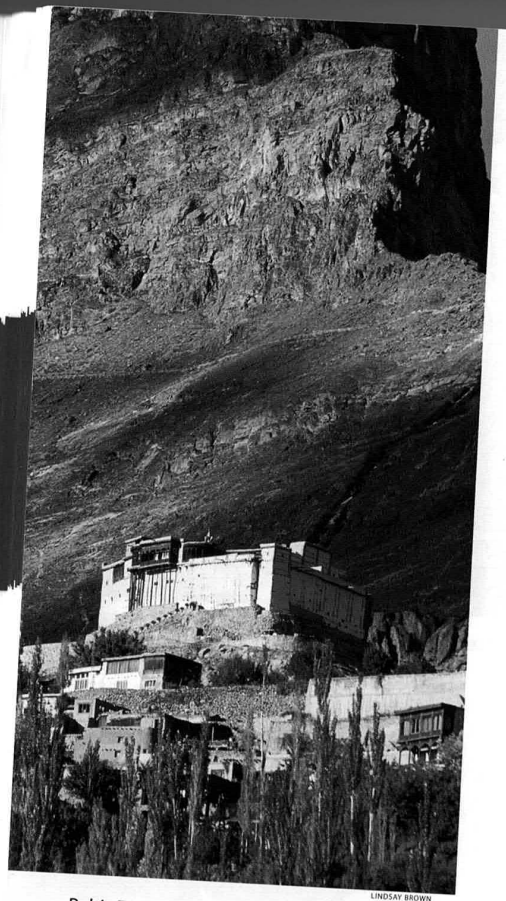
Porter, Baltistan (p371)

GRANT DIXON

Hunza River (p308), Hunza

JOHN MOCK





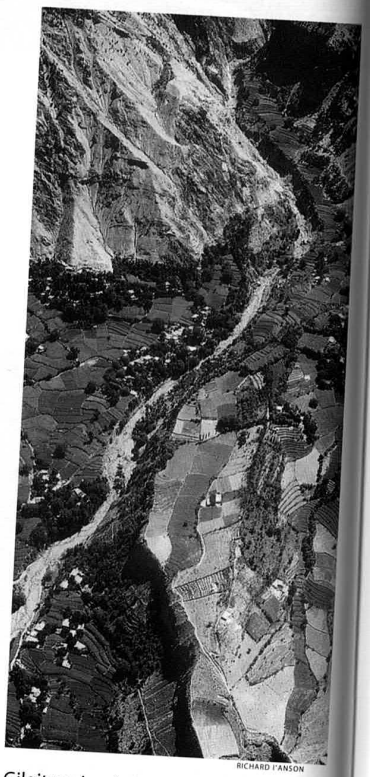
LINDSAY BROWN

Baltit Fort (p313), Hunza

Traditional music, Hunza (p308)

Petroglyphs, Indus River, Indus Kohistan (p273)

LINDSAY BROWN



RICHARD I'ANSON

Gilgit region (p279), Karakoram Highway

summer settlements. See p361 for a description of a five day walk over the Pakora Pass from Upper Naltar.

Sleeping & Eating

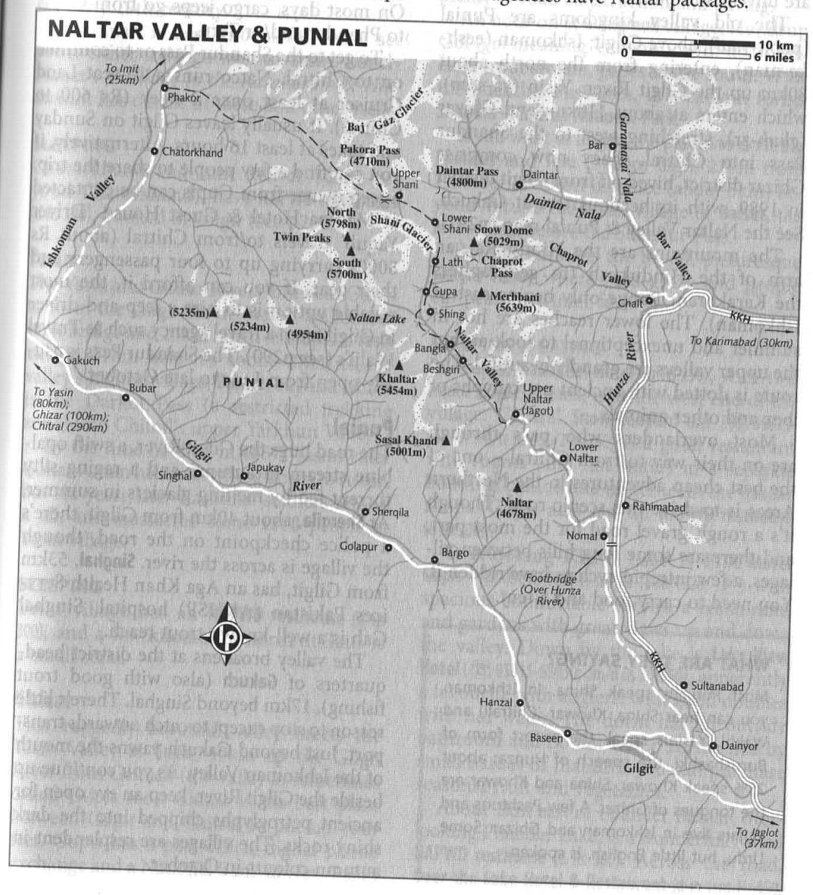
At Nomal there's an **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300), and its garden is a nice place to pitch a tent. Book with the chief engineer in Gilgit (see p290). There's nothing at Lower Naltar.

At Upper Naltar the Hilltop Hotel has a couple of rooms, or you can pitch your own tent. Next door is Prince Hotel. On the west side are an **NAPWD resthouse** (d standard/VIP Rs 300/400), and Pasban Inn with big doubles. Gujar kids with sticky fingers means the hotel gardens are the safest place for camping. Only basic meals, which taste pretty good at this elevation, will be available.

At Naltar Lake is the Lake View Hotel camp site, and a place known as Red Stone Huts that has a kitchen and a tent with spaces on the ground (no huts for tourists). Both are usually open from June to September.

Getting There & Around

From Gilgit's general bus stand, at least two or three passenger jeeps go each afternoon to Naltar for Rs 40, but be sure yours goes to Upper Naltar or be prepared to hike up from Lower Naltar. Gilgit to Upper Naltar takes two to 2½ hours by jeep. Hire was Rs 1300 return at the time of research. Most Gilgit travel agencies have Naltar packages.



At Upper Naltar you may be able to hire a horse for a day trip or overnight trip to Naltar Lake; ask your hotel-wallah.

PUNIAL, ISHKOMAN, YASIN & GHIZAR

The Gilgit River basin upstream of Gilgit is mainly familiar to trekkers and anglers. Once a nest of small feuding kingdoms, it's still a surprising patchwork of people and languages, with hardly anything big enough to be called a town. The population is 80% to 85% Ismaili (it was through here that Ismailism arrived from Afghanistan). Most others are Sunni, with some Shiites in Yasin. The only visible women are Ismailis, who dress in bright colours and pillbox caps, and are unveiled in public.

The old valley kingdoms are Punial (poon-*yaal*), above Gilgit; Ishkoman (eesh-*ko*-man), entering from the north about 80km up the Gilgit River; Yasin (ya-*seen*), which enters at about 110km; and Ghizar (*ghuh*-zr), stretching west to the Shandur Pass into Chitral. They now comprise Ghizar district, hived off from Gilgit district in 1989, with its headquarters at Gakuch. See the Naltar Valley & Punial map (p297).

The mountains are the Hindu Raj, an arm of the Hindukush (to geographers the Karakoram Range only begins east of Ishkoman). The lower reaches are hot in summer and unexceptional to look at, but the upper valleys are grandly beautiful. The route is dotted with ancient petroglyphs of ibex and other animals.

Most overlanders who pass through are on their way to/from Chitral – one of the best cheap adventures in the Northern Areas is to drive this scenic road. Though it's a rough gravel road for the most part, and there are some long hills between villages, a few intrepid cyclists have ridden it. You need to carry food and a tent.

WHAT ARE THEY SAYING?

Most Punialis speak Shina. In Ishkoman you can hear Shina, Khowar (Chitrali) and Wakhi. Yasinis speak the purest form of Burushashki, the speech of Hunza; about 25% speak Khowar. Shina and Khowar are the tongues of Ghizar. A few Pashtuns and Gujars live in Ishkoman and Ghizar. Some Urdu, but little English, is spoken.

Getting There & Away

Buses leave from Natco's Punial Rd bus yard for Yasin at 8am (Rs 70) and 9am (minibus, Rs 100) and take six to seven hours. For Gupis, a bus departs at 10am (Rs 80, five to six hours), and for Gakuch (Rs 50, 3½ to four hours) catch either the Yasin or Gupis buses. For Ishkoman, a bus departs at 11am (Rs 70).

Less predictable are daily cargo and passenger jeeps leaving from shops along Punial Rd in Gilgit. Ask at Kakakhel General Store about Gupis, Phander and Teru. Nazir Khan's shop also has Gupis connections. For Ishkoman, you can ask in Gakuch (at the auto-parts shop opposite the Snowdrop Inn) about jeeps to Chatorkhand and Imit. On most days, cargo jeeps go from Gupis to Phander and/or Teru.

To get to the Shandur Pass or to continue on to Chitral, Natco runs a 10-seat Land Cruiser at least once a week (Rs 600 to Chitral). It usually leaves Gilgit on Sunday and takes at least 16 hours. Alternatively, if you can find a few people to share the trip, a jeep owner from Gupis can be contacted at Madina Hotel & Guest House. 'Driver Yaqub' travels to/from Chitral (about Rs 8000) carrying up to four passengers and their gear. If you can afford it, the most reliable option is to hire a jeep and driver in Gilgit from a travel agency such as Travel Walji's (see p290). The Shandur Pass is usually open from June to late October.

Punial

The road hugs the Gilgit River, a swift opal-blue stream in autumn and a raging silty torrent fed by melting glaciers in summer. At **Sherqila**, about 40km from Gilgit, there's a police checkpoint on the road, though the village is across the river. **Singhal**, 53km from Gilgit, has an Aga Khan Health Services Pakistan (AKHSP) hospital. Singhal Gah is a well-known trout reach.

The valley broadens at the district headquarters of **Gakuch** (also with good trout fishing), 17km beyond Singhal. There's little reason to stop except to catch onwards transport. Just beyond Gakuch yawns the mouth of the Ishkoman Valley. As you continue up beside the Gilgit River, keep an eye open for ancient petroglyphs chipped into the dark shiny rocks. The villages are resplendent in autumn colours in October.

SLEEPING

At Singhal, there's basic Ghizar Tourist Cottage, open only in summer. At Gakuch, friendly **Hill Haven** (☎ 05814-51110; s/d Rs 150/200) has simple rooms. Similar options include Karim Guesthouse and Three Star Hotel & Restaurant. Golapur, Singhal and Gakuch have heavily used **NAPWD resthouses** (d Rs 300), where you can camp in the grounds with permission from the chief engineer in Gilgit (see p290).

Ishkoman

Chatorkhand, 25km from Gakuch, is the traditional seat of the *pir* of Chatorkhand, head of a line of hereditary religious leaders who came from Bukhara in Central Asia in the early 19th century.

Ishkoman is best known for treks; see p361. Other treks go west to Yasin. Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush* has details of these and other treks.

SLEEPING

Chatorkhand and Imit (about 30km beyond Chatorkhand), have **NAPWD resthouses** (d Rs 300), booked in Gilgit (see p290).

Yasin

The Yasin and Ghizar Rivers join near Gupis to form the Gilgit River. Across a Chinese-built bridge and 25km north of Gupis is **Yasin** village. From here it's about 40km to the valley's highest village, **Darkot**, beyond which is the Darkot Pass (a restricted trekking zone) into Chitral's upper Yarkhun Valley.

By the time he died in 1857, Yasini ruler Gohar Aman held everything down to Astor, but six years later Kashmiri soldiers retook it all, and massacred some 1200 people at Yasin village.

SLEEPING

Yasin village has an **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300), and a few kilometres north at Taus is a small serai.

Ghizar

This ruggedly beautiful valley meets the Yasin Valley at **Gupis**, 40km up the Gilgit River from Gakuch (the valley is sometimes called Gupis too). Ghizar is the best place between Gilgit and Chitral to put up your feet. Gupis has a post office, digital phone exchange and a National Bank in New Rajah Bazaar (take the right fork, heading west, just past the post office and walk about 70m).

Just beyond Gupis (about 7km) is **Khalti Lake** (a natural dam on the Ghizar River) and the small village of **Jhandrot**. About a three-hour drive beyond Gupis, the road crosses the river at the village of **Chashi** and rises through a vast graveyard. About 60km from Gupis, where the valley opens wide, is **Phander** (*fun*-dr), a good place to break the journey. Flour milled locally from wheat grown in the low-terraced fields here has a reputation for producing excellent chapatis. Horses can be hired at Phander for local trips. From Phander, the road deteriorates, though at the time of research there was plenty of road construction and paving.

An hour on at **Gulagmuli** village, Hundrup Gol (*gol* meaning 'canyon'), with its world-class trout stream, gapes to the south. With the Shandur Pass area, this canyon forms **Shandur-Hundrup National Park**.

If you want to linger, the places to do it are **Phander** and **Teru** (3100m high, 22km from Phander). A short distance (about 5km) beyond Teru is the small village of **Barsat**, the last village before the Shandur Pass.

Beyond Barsat is the broad, picturesque **Langar Valley** where yaks graze and people cut peat for winter fuel.

SLEEPING & EATING

In Gupis, **Kakakhel Hotel** (tr Rs 250), with two basic triple rooms, is at the west end of the village. Central **Snow Leopard Inn** (☎ 05815-55070; s/d/tr Rs 150/200/250) is a good restaurant with rooms (and hot water) in a separate building, behind and underneath the bazaar shops. Gupis also has an **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300).

Overlooking Khalti Lake is **PTDC Motel Gupis** (☎ 05815-58071; s/d Rs 1100/1320; P) with spacious comfortable rooms, a restaurant, and gardens with great views up and down the valley. Down by the lake is **Lake View Hotel** (☎ 05815-58050; dm/d Rs 50/350), apparently a favourite with anglers, with good doubles with hot water. The dorm has an outside bathroom and no hot water. At the nearby small bazaar of Jhandrot you can purchase seasonal fruit and vegetables.

About 2km east of Phander Bazaar, overlooking Phander Lake, is a wonderfully sited **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300). Across the road, **Over the Lake Hotel & Restaurant** (d in tent Rs 150,

d with thin mattress Rs 200, d with better mattress Rs 300) has one tent and three comfortable and clean double rooms (only one at the cheaper price), which share a toilet and a cold-water tap. The owner, who is one of the *chowkidars* for the resthouse, can provide basic, inexpensive meals or cook your provisions. There is a large and completed PTDC Motel at the lake, but at the time of writing it was occupied by the army. At the west end of Phander Bazaar is the small seasonal **Tourist Inn** (d Rs 150) with cheaper beds in tents, and charpoys.

Teru has only a sublimely primitive **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300), while at Barsat there is **Hotel Barsat** (thin mattress on ground Rs 50, mattress on wooden platform Rs 100) with rustic dorm accommodation and prices inclusive of dinner and breakfast. There are plenty of blankets – and you will need them in spring or autumn – but not much food. Bring your own provisions or enjoy the potatoes!

Shandur Pass

The 3810m Shandur Pass, 50km from Phander and 108km back to Gupis, is actually broad enough to have several lakes, and a polo ground where the best players from Gilgit and Chitral meet every July, part of a three- or four-day festival of polo and merrymaking (see The Game of Kings on p291).

With Hundrup Gol, the Shandur Pass area forms the 518 sq km **Shandur-Hundrup National Park** (see p61). It was declared a national park in 1993, partly in the hope of keeping an environmental lid on the polo tournament and the mess left by its 12,000-plus spectators. Visitors will find nothing to indicate its boundaries.

For details of the road and towns on the Chitral side of the Shandur, see p246.

BALTISTAN

Rising in Tibet, as one of the four sacred rivers, the Indus flows northwest almost to Gilgit, in a deep trough dividing the Himalaya from the Karakoram, and the Indian subcontinent from Asia. Before turning south it drains Baltistan, or 'Little Tibet', an arid land inhabited by people who today speak classical Tibetan and in the 17th century were the masters of Chitral, the Northern Areas and Ladakh.

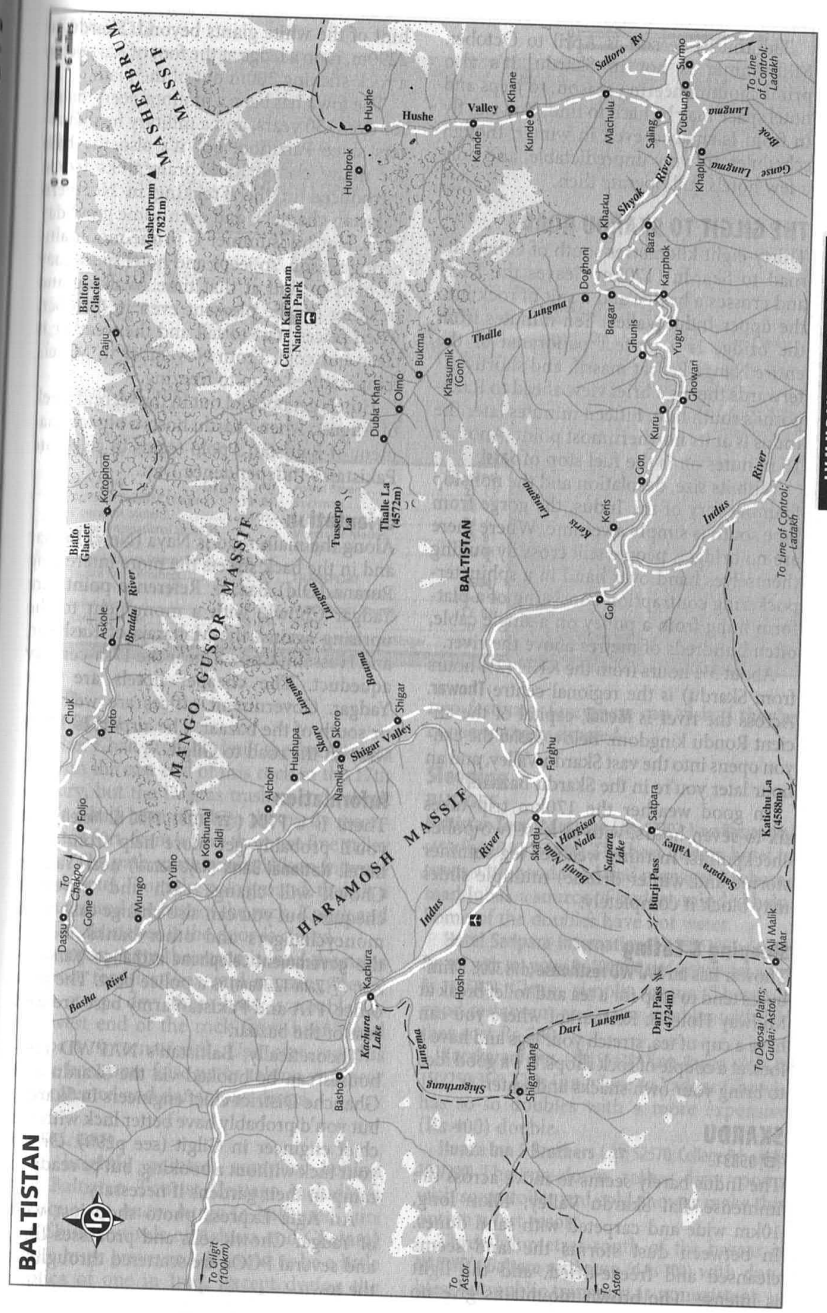
Buddhism probably came to Baltistan in the 3rd century with Gandharan missionaries, and again when it was part of the Tibetan empire in the 8th and 9th centuries. Islam arrived in the 15th century, probably via Kashmir. Baltistan then consisted of several small kingdoms; the most important were Rondu and Skardu on the Indus, Khaplu, Shigar and Astor. Skardu's Maqpon dynasty gradually absorbed the others.

Near the Balti capital of Skardu the Indus is joined by the Shigar and Shyok Rivers, flowing down from the Baltoro Muztagh, a segment of the Karakoram backbone containing the densest mass of glaciers and high mountains on earth, including 8611m K2, second only to Mt Everest. Naturally there are also unparalleled opportunities for trekking and mountaineering, and it is the escalating impacts of these activities that led to the establishment in 1993 of the 9738 sq km **Central Karakoram National Park** (p62). This is by far Pakistan's biggest protected area, stretching north into Gojal, west to Haramosh and Rakaposhi, south almost to Skardu and Khaplu, and east to the crest of the High Karakoram.

Until an air route was opened from Islamabad in the 1960s, Baltistan remained almost medieval in its isolation. From 1972 to 1985, simultaneous with construction of the KKH, Pakistan Army Engineers cut a road up the Indus that is more formidable than most of the KKH.

The poorly defined northern end of the Line of Control tempted India in 1982 to send troops onto the Siachen Glacier in Baltistan's eastern corner, which Pakistan regards as part of the Northern Areas. The two countries have militarised the area, skirmishing repeatedly in what has come to be called 'the highest war on earth'.

But away from this off-limits zone, amid awesome scenery, are world-class treks, two national parks, and villages that seem hardly touched by the 20th century, let alone the 21st. Nearly everyone is Shiite Muslim and not a woman is visible in Skardu. Men and women visitors alike should dress conservatively; shorts are out, and even bare arms put orthodox backs up. Many people of Shigar and Khaplu belong to the Nurbakhshi branch of Islam, whose women are unveiled and as open and brightly dressed as the Ismailis of Hunza.



The tourist season is April to October. Midsummer is hot in Skardu. It's also prime mountaineering season, so jeeps and hotel space may be hard to find. You can fly in from Islamabad even in winter, though schedules are very unpredictable, and only a few hotels still operate then.

THE GILGIT TO SKARDU ROAD

Thirty-eight kilometres south of Gilgit, the road to Skardu (170km) leaves the KKH and crosses a bridge and a spit of rock into the upper Indus Valley. Ten minutes from the bridge is a perfect panorama of the entire Nanga Parbat massif, and shortly afterwards there's a brief view ahead to Rakaposhi's south face. Fifteen minutes later the Indus is at its northernmost point. Another 15 minutes on is the fuel stop of **Sassi**.

With its size, desolation and the nonstop foaming fury of the Indus, the gorge from here south is simply awesome. Where there are no bridges, people still cross by pulling themselves hand over hand in a sphincter-puckering contraption consisting of a platform hung from a pulley on a single cable, often hundreds of metres above the river.

About 3½ hours from the KKH (2½ hours from Skardu) is the regional centre **Thowar**. Across the river is **Mendi**, capital of the ancient Rondu kingdom. Below **Basho** the canyon opens into the vast Skardu Valley, and an hour later you're in the Skardu Bazaar.

In good weather the 170km trip takes six to seven hours, with at least two police checkpoints. In rainy weather (eg summer storms and winter drizzle) multiple slides may block it completely.

Sleeping & Eating

Thowar has an **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300). Minibuses tend to stop for a tea and toilet break at Midway Hotel & Restaurant where you can have a cup of tea, stretch your legs and have a look at a couple of rock shops. It's a good idea to bring your own snacks and water.

SKARDU

☎ 05831

The Indus barely seems to move across the immense, flat Skardu Valley, 40km long, 10km wide and carpeted with sand dunes. In between dust storms the land seems cleansed and freeze-dried, and the light is intense. The brown mountains give no hint of the white giants beyond. Skardu, at 2290m, is on a ledge at the foot of Karpochu, a rock sticking 300m out of the plain.

The town has been a mountaineers' haunt for over 150 years, and a military headquarters since Partition, but it's also the base for many classic Karakoram treks (some introduced in the Trekking in Northern Pakistan chapter), and even some good day trips. Hot midsummer is prime mountaineering season, so jeeps and hotel space may be hard to find at that time. Walking and trekking can be pleasant even in October, when prices start to fall and the weather is clear and cold. From November to March, temperatures drop to freezing.

Hotels get booked out in the second week of August, when Skardu hosts a big tournament of Baltistan's polo teams to celebrate Pakistan's Independence Day.

Orientation

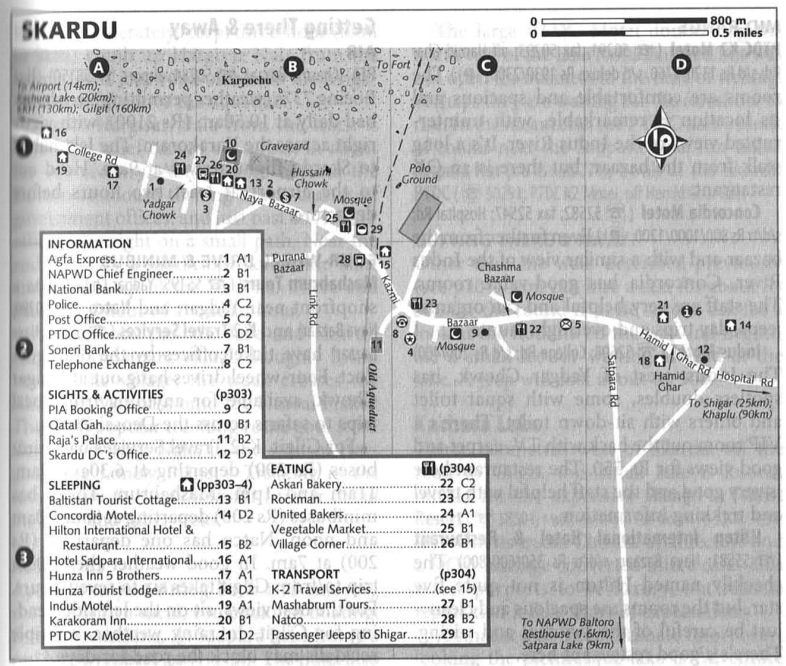
Along the main road is Naya (New) Bazaar and in the back streets the more interesting Purana (Old) Bazaar. Reference points are Yadgar Chowk, with a monument to the uprising against the Maharaja of Kashmir, and Hussaini Chowk, near the 17th-century aqueduct. The cheaper hotels are near Yadgar. Government offices are well east or south of the bazaar. The airport is 14km west on the road to Gilgit.

Information

There is a **PTDC** (☎ 50291; PTDC K2 Motel), but you'll probably get more help from your hotel. **National Bank** (Naya Bazaar) near Yadgar Chowk will change cash and travellers cheques, but you can also change cash with moneychangers and other banks. Beside the **government telephone exchange** (Kazmi Bazaar; ⏲ 7am-12.30am) is a police post. The post office, PIA and Pakistan army base are well east of the bazaar.

Theoretically, Baltistan's NAPWD resthouses can be booked via the Skardu and Ghanche District chief engineers in Skardu, but you'd probably have better luck with the chief engineer in Gilgit (see p290). Or try your luck without a booking, but be ready to camp in their gardens if necessary.

An Agfa Express photo shop just west of Yadgar Chowk sells and processes film, and several PCOs are scattered throughout the town.



Sights

KARPOCHU

Ali Sher Khan probably built the **fort** (admission Rs 25) on the east end of this rock in the 17th century, but the Dogras trashed and rebuilt it. It's a half-hour climb to the partly reconstructed fort, from where there are fine valley views. The path starts beside Hilton International Hotel. From the polo ground, there is a track around the base of the rock. Knock and yell for assistance if the door is closed.

You can get to the summit (and the ruins of more fortifications, and amazing views) by a steep, dry, three-hour scramble up the west end of the rock from near Hotel Sadpara International. Use care, as this route has some false paths taking you near unprotected and dangerous drops.

QATAL GAH

The brightly painted complex behind the Baltistan Tourist Cottage includes a mosque, an *imam barga* (a hall used during Shiite festivals of Ashura and Chelum) and a huge graveyard. It's said to be a little replica of one in Iraq. Except during the two festivals, foreigners can visit if they're conservatively dressed.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Baltistan Tourist Cottage (☎ 52707; Naya Bazaar; dm/s/d/tr Rs 50/100/150/200) The best budget hotel in town with good food and manager Mohammad Iqbal, a source of budget-minded help. Some of the doubles have hot water.

Hotel Sadpara International (☎ 52951; College Rd; s/d with hot water Rs 200/400, s/d without hot water Rs 150/200) Clean, simple rooms. There's a good restaurant and a few doubles with TV that cost Rs 500.

Karakoram Inn (☎ 55438; Naya Bazaar; s/d/tr Rs 150/250/350) This inn, close to Yadgar Chowk, has so-so doubles with a more expensive (Rs 400) double.

Hunza Inn 5 Brothers (☎ 52570; College Rd; s/d Rs 150/200) The run-down, rather dirty rooms with squat toilet and cold shower make this option a last resort.

Three kilometres south of the bazaar is **NAPWD's Baltoro resthouse** (d Rs 300) with doubles, but public transport is nonexistent.

MID-RANGE

PTDC K2 Motel (☎ 50291; fax 50293; off Hamid Ghar Rd; s/d Rs 1320/1760, s/d deluxe Rs 1930/2300; P) The rooms are comfortable and spacious and its location is remarkable, with uninterrupted views of the Indus River. It's a long walk from the bazaar, but there is an OK restaurant.

Concordia Motel (☎ 52582; fax 52547; Hospital Rd; s/d/tr Rs 800/1000/1200; P) Even further from the bazaar and with a similar view of the Indus River, Concordia has good-value rooms. The staff are very helpful and can organise jeeps, day trips and overnight jaunts.

Indus Motel (☎ 52608; College Rd; s/d Rs 200/400) The Indus, west of Yadgar Chowk, has spotless doubles, some with squat toilet and others with sit-down toilet. There's a VIP room out the back with TV, carpet and good views for Rs 550. The restaurant here is very good and the staff helpful with travel and trekking information.

Hilton International Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 55581; Naya Bazaar; s/d/tr Rs 350/600/800) The cheekily named Hilton is not quite five star, but the rooms are spacious and clean – just be careful of the switches and wiring. There's a good restaurant here.

Hunza Tourist Lodge (☎ 52515; Hamid Ghar Rd; s/d/tr Rs 600/900/1200) This friendly, small hotel across from the PTDC K2 Motel complex has very spacious clean rooms. There's a good restaurant and a small, well-kept garden.

Eating

The hotels have the best restaurants in town. Best of the budget and mid-range hotel restaurants include **Baltistan Tourist Cottage** (mains Rs 50-80) with good chips, omelettes and mutton *karai*, and the slightly pricier **Indus Motel** (mains Rs 60-100) does a tasty chicken pilau (Rs 75), as well as Pakistani and Chinese standards. For a hot snack, try **Village Corner** (Yadgar Chowk), where a tough beef tikka costs only Rs 5.

For decent coffee, herbal teas and ice cream try **Rockman** (Kazmi Bazaar), but only in summer. Skardu is hard work for vegetarians, but there's fruit in summer, and many general stores and bakeries. **United Bakers** (Yadgar Chowk) has baked goods of questionable freshness, but also plenty of packaged groceries, drinks etc. Head to **Askari Bakery** (Chashma Bazaar) for fresher bread, cakes and biscuits.

Getting There & Away

AIR

PIA (Chasma Bazaar ☎ 50284; airport ☎ 58150) flies Boeing 737s (weather permitting) to Islamabad daily at 10.50am (Rs 2100), with views right across the Karakoram. The Islamabad to Skardu flight arrives at 9am. Head out to the airport at least two hours before departure.

FOUR-WHEEL DRIVE & MINIBUS

Mashabrum Tours (☎ 55195; Yadgar Chowk) has a shopfront near Yadgar; and **Natco** (☎ 50290; Naya Bazaar) and **K-2 Travel Services** (☎ 52855; Naya Bazaar) have ticket offices by the old aqueduct. Four-wheel drives hang out at Yadgar Chowk, available for anything from local trips to safaris across the Deosai Plains.

For Gilgit, K-2 Travel Services has minibuses (Rs 200) departing at 6.30am, 9am, 11am and 1pm. Mashabrum Tours has minibuses (Rs 200) departing at 8am, 10am and noon. Natco has one departure (Rs 200) at 7am. In good weather the 170km trip to/from Gilgit takes six to seven hours. For the best views, sit on the left side heading for Gilgit. In rainy weather, multiple rockfalls may block the road for days.

To Rawalpindi, K-2 Travel Services has a minibus departing at 1pm (Rs 550). Mashabrum Tours has a bus departing at 10am (Rs 450), a Coaster at noon (Rs 480) and an air-con Coaster at 1pm (Rs 610). A Natco Coaster departs at 11am (Rs 470) and a bus at 1pm (Rs 450). The trip takes about 22 to 24 hours.

Getting Around

Decrepit passenger taxis ply the bazaars, and a taxi to the airport is about Rs 200. Suzukis can be hired for less from Yadgar Chowk.

AROUND SKARDU

Satpara Lake & Buddha

Nine kilometres south of Skardu is pristine Satpara Lake, brilliant blue and stocked with rainbow trout. At the time of research, work was underway to raise the level of the lake by building a dam. It is expected that much of the foreshore embracing the current accommodation, and the picturesque island, will be submerged. The hotels will move, but it will take years for the foreshore vegetation to establish. The walk to the lake is a dry, moderately steep, three-hour (8km to 9km) climb up Hargisar Nala from the bazaar, on a jeep road or beside the irrigation channel above the aqueduct.

Across Hargisar Nala from the track is a Buddha relief carved on a rock in about the 7th century. About 200m beyond the Baltoro resthouse turning and a cluster of government offices, and just past an AKRSP office, turn right on a small path. Near the end of this is a footbridge across the nala, and a track up to the Buddha. There and back is a detour of about an hour.

A road runs past the lake and 6km to 8km on to Satpara village. Roughly 25km beyond the village, the track crosses the Ali Malik Mar pass onto the Deosai Plains. The most popular trekking route goes from Skardu up Burji Nala, to the west of Hargisar; see Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush* for further detail on these and other treks.

ACTIVITIES

Apart from just sitting back and enjoying the lake with a meal, you could go boating, fishing or walking. At Sadpara Lake Inn you can hire a **rowboat** (per hr Rs 130). The hotel also runs **motorboat trips** (half/full lake per boatload Rs 300/600). **Fishing gear** (rental Rs 250) is cheap to hire, but the cost of a fishing licence (which can be arranged by hotel management) is US$10 for foreigners. Trekking equipment hire and guides can also be arranged at Sadpara Lake Inn.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotels are open from May to October.

Lakeview Motel Sadpara (camp sites Rs 50, s/d with lake view & hot-water shower Rs 200/600, s/d without view & hot-water shower Rs 100/300) This small but earnest hotel is the first accommodation you come to at the lake. There are only two rooms for guests and a kitchen providing basic food. The friendly manager keeps the place spotless. Note that the hot water is supplied by a wood-fired geyser.

Sadpara Lake Inn (☎ 58220; camp sites Rs 200, two-person tents without beds Rs 250, s/d Rs 600/1200) Slightly more upmarket. The rooms are comfortable and meticulously clean. There's good food with views in the lakeside **restaurant** (mains Rs 50-300), where trout from the lake is sometimes on the menu: fish and chips are Rs 300.

The large PTDC Motel dominating the north end of the lake looks finished but was not open for business at the time of writing. Perhaps they are waiting for the foreshore to rise. In the meantime, the PTDC uses a block of rooms near the Sadpara Lake Inn called **Satpara Hut** (s/d Rs 550/770); book at the Skardu **PTDC** (☎ 50291; PTDC K2 Motel, off Hamid Ghar Rd).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Other than the walk described previously (see p304), you can hire a taxi for about Rs 300 for the round trip. Be sure to ask for a look at the Buddha on the way and negotiate a small fee for waiting around at the lake. A jeep will cost about Rs 500.

Kachura Lake

Thirty kilometres west of Skardu, off the road to Gilgit, this small lake is known mostly for the expensive **Shangri-La Tourist Resort** (☎ 58501; r with/without full board Rs 5500/3250; P) with its ersatz Chinese architecture and a DC-3 fuselage converted into a café. This resort purports to be luxury, but readers report that it falls short of expectations.

A smaller and more intimate resort overlooking the picturesque lake is Adventure Travel's **Tourist Camping Resort** (☎ 3204261073; adventure@isb.comsats.net.pk). This is the base for **Adventure Travel's** (www.adventure-touroperator.com) trekking in the region.

There are **petroglyphs** along the streamside trail up Shigarthang Lungma (*lungma* is Balti for a tributary valley), above the lake. This is an alternative to Satpara Lake for trekking the Deosai Plains (Kachura to Astor in four to six days); see p305.

DEOSAI PLAINS

The Deosai Plains, about 50km southwest of Skardu, comprise an immense, uninhabited, grassy plateau bordering Indian-administered Kashmir. Nowhere are they lower than about 4000m; they're only accessible for about four months each year, and snowbound for the rest.

A track across the plains has become a popular jeep trek route between Skardu and the Astor Valley (see p284), and in 1993 some 3630 sq km were declared Deosai Plains National Park (see p62) out of concern for its subalpine vegetation, alpine meadows and Himalayan brown bears. The region also supports the endangered snow

leopard and Indian wolf, plus Himalayan ibex and golden marmots.

From July to September, you can trek from the Astor Valley to Skardu in as little as a week. Intrepid mountain bikers have done Astor to Skardu in five days. Go prepared for mosquitoes, cold weather and sudden storms. A jeep can make the journey from Gilgit to Skardu via Astor, Chilim Gah and Deosai in 16 to 18 hours, with an overnight stop in Astor village.

Routes across Deosai are detailed in Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush*.

SHIGAR

One of two routes from Skardu into the High Karakoram (the other is the Shyok Valley), the lush and yawning Shigar Valley was once a separate kingdom. Shigar's original settlers may have come over the Karakoram from Yarkand, in Xinjiang.

Shady Shigar village, where the Bauma Lungma empties into the Shigar River, is as far as most nontrekkers go. The main landmark here is the former Raja of Shigar's crumbling timber-and-stone palace. Royal descendants now live in the newer house in front. It's a five-minute walk from the road, up the left side of the stream.

Along the Shigar Valley wall, downriver of Bauma Lungma, are recently excavated **Buddhist ruins**, including monastery foundations and rock inscriptions from as early as the 5th century.

For views of the Shigar Valley, walk up Bauma Lungma for 20 minutes and double back up to the thumb of rock above the village.

Sleeping

Shigar village has a very pleasant **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300), with good walk-in odds in May/June and September/October.

Getting There & Away

The village is 32km (1½ hours by jeep) on a rough track from Skardu. Natco has a daily bus for Rs 50. From 11am to about 2pm, cargo jeeps go from Hussaini Chowk and surrounding alleys for about Rs 80.

KHAPLU

About 35km above Skardu, the Indus – locally called the Sind – is joined by the Shyok River (pronounced as one syllable, roughly 'shok'). The Shyok is the axis of Khaplu, the biggest and richest of Baltistan's ancient kingdoms, and the scenery is awesome.

The Shyok and Indus Basins above their junction (embracing ancient Khaplu, sometimes spelled Khapalu, and the four smaller principalities of Keris, Parkutta, Tolti and Kharmang) now comprise Ghanche district, with Khaplu village as headquarters.

Khaplu's Nurbakhshi Muslims are more open-hearted than the people of Skardu but they're still shy of foreigners and can be touchy about being photographed. Little English is spoken and even Urdu is a foreign language.

Allow at least a full day around Khaplu village, even if you're not a walker, and be prepared for cooler weather than Skardu's.

Skardu to Khaplu

On the roadside west of **Gol** are boulders carved with Buddhist motifs, old script and modern graffiti. Half an hour on, the road crosses the Indus and joins the Shyok. Opposite is **Keris**, at the mouth of a valley that was once a separate kingdom under a branch of Khaplu's royal line.

Ancient Khaplu starts past the bridge at **Ghowari**, first of a series of prosperous-looking villages strung like pennants along a harsh and rather overpowering setting. Near **Karphok** the road is carved into perpendicular walls. Twenty minutes on, huge **Thalle Lungma** gives a glimpse of the Masherbrum Range; up this valley is a three- or four-day trek from Khasumik over the 4572m Thalle La to Shigar; see p371.

From Khaplu village, it's still 70km to 80km up the Shyok to the Line of Control, but the road is closed to foreigners soon after Surmo.

Khaplu Village

☎ 05832

This handsome village of timber-and-stone houses and precision-made dry-stone walls climbs up a wide alluvial fan beneath an arc of granite walls. Ingenious irrigation has made it a shady, fertile oasis. As you climb its twisting track, the icy peaks of the Masherbrum Range rise on the other side of the valley. It's hard to imagine a more majestic setting.

The main attractions are the 2600m-high village itself, the old **royal palace** and the even older **mosque** above it at Chakhchun, and the heart-stopping views.

A stony track climbs to the lower bazaar (with PCO, shops and a National Bank); a five-minute walk. Half an hour beyond, at a fork in the road, is an elegant but run-down traditional-style house, where royal descendants live. Twenty minutes up the left fork is the polo ground, and uphill from that is the old royal palace. If you get lost, the local word for it is *Kar*, or try 'Raja-house'. To look inside, ask at the houses nearby.

Twenty minutes further up is **Chakhchun village**, with a mosque whose foundations were supposedly laid in the 16th century when the people embraced Islam. Non-Muslims may not enter this or other mosques. There are several more villages in Ganse Lungma above Chakhchun.

SLEEPING

PTDC Khapalu Motel (☎ 50146; camp sites Rs 300, s/d Rs 1540/1820) This comfortable motel overlooks the river just beyond the turn-off to the village. The rooms are spacious with hot water and there's a good restaurant. You can camp in the grounds and use a hot shower.

Khapalu Inn (s/d Rs 150/200, r with shared bathroom Rs 100) In the lower bazaar, with basic rooms with squat toilets and cold showers. A 10-minute walk uphill from the bazaar is the mid-range Karakoram Lodge.

K-7 Hotel & Restaurant (s/d Rs 300/500, r with shared bathroom Rs 200) On the track up to Chakhchun, an aching hour's walk from the road, this hotel is open from June to September with comfortable rooms and hot water.

Just before you reach PTDC Khaplu Motel, there is an **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses from Natco in Skardu depart at 6am, 7am and 9am and cost Rs 70. Mashabrum Tours has one bus departing Skardu at 10.30am (Rs 60). K-2 Travel Services leaves Skardu at 11am and noon (Rs 70). Buses depart Khaplu between 8am and 9am. From shops around the newsagent in Skardu's Naya Bazaar, cargo jeeps depart from about 11am for (Rs 60 to 70 – the return trip with just passengers is cheaper). The 103km trip takes three hours by cargo jeep.

HUSHE & MASHERBRUM VIEWS

Those who would like to see the gorgeous 7821m massif of Masherbrum without trekking to it have only to walk up the Shyok Valley road. As the Hushe Valley opens up, Masherbrum looms into view at its head, an unforgettable sight. It's a flat, hot 6km walk past Brok Lungma and Yuchung village to the best viewpoint, at a turn in the road. Surmo, 3km on, is about as far as foreigners can go towards the Siachen Glacier.

See p373 for details, and Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush* for further options in and around the Hushe Valley.

Hushe Valley

Hushe (*hu*-shay) is the trekkers' route to Masherbrum, and an alternative to Shigar for mountaineers heading towards Concordia. For a close look at Masherbrum you can take a four-day (three-night) walk on a moderate grade from Khaplu to Hushe and back, with stops at Kande, Hushe and Kande again. At the time of research, the Military Police at Khaplu were stopping foreigners travelling to Hushe (even though it is in an open zone) until a local guide (from Hushe) was organised to accompany them.

HUMBROK

These beautiful, spring-fed pastures west of, and high above, Hushe are easy to reach on a day hike (about four hours up and two hours back). From Hushe, cross to the west side of the river on the lower of two bridges and walk half an hour up Humbrok Nala. Cross it on a wooden bridge and follow the north bank all the way to the pastures.

SLEEPING

Camping sites abound. Machulu has an **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300). At Kande you can stay at the K6 Hotel & Restaurant above the jeep road to the west.

In Hushe there's basic accommodation at the Mashabrum Inn, and several camp sites where you can purchase hot food, including Lela Peak Camping, the small K6 & K7 Camping Place, Ghandoghoro La Camping Place and Ghandughoro Camping Place.

SHOPPING

In Hushe village, the K2 Shop, Aslam Bakery & General Store and Mashebrum Shop

have basic supplies, as well as the leavings of expeditions.

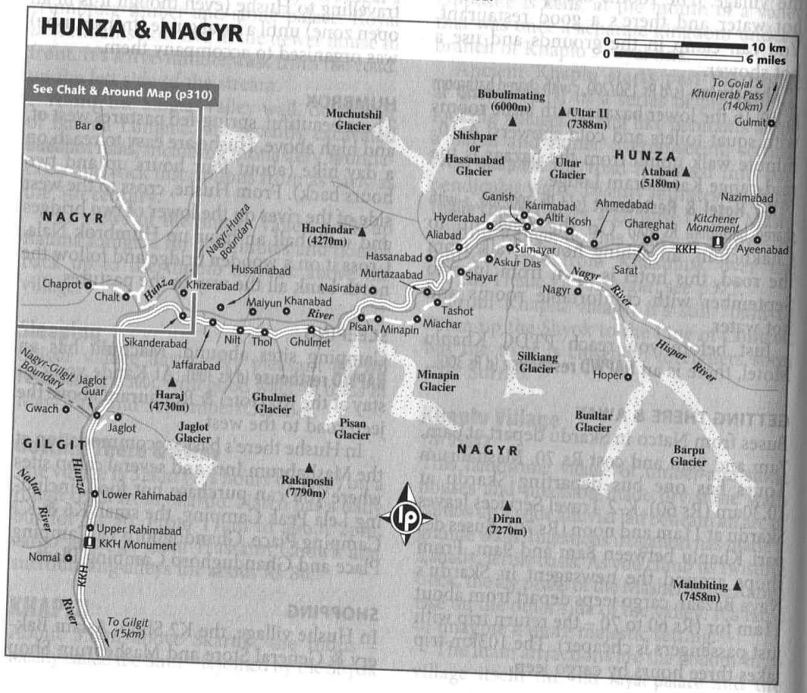
GETTING THERE & AWAY

A suspension bridge crosses the Shyok just upriver of Khaplu, and a wide jeep road goes all the way up the Hushe Valley to Hushe village. Cargo jeeps make the 148km trip to Hushe from Skardu, though they'll have little room for someone getting on near Khaplu. In midsummer you might get a lift with a climbing party. But be prepared to walk the gently climbing 40km from Khaplu to Hushe village – about four hours up the west side of the valley via Saling to Machulu, 3½ hours more to Kande, then 3½ hours on to Hushe village. At the time of research, the bridge was out at Kande and a round trip by 'special hire' jeep was as much as US$100.

HUNZA & NAGYR

The Hunza Valley is the centrepiece of the KKH. The continuous sweep from the Hunza River through mighty, grey-brown scree slopes and up to snowy peaks, including 7790m Rakaposhi, is a reminder of the river's deep slice across the Karakoram. In spring the famous fruit trees erupt in white blossom in endless tiers, and autumn is a riot of yellow poplars, reddening orchards and maize drying on rooftops.

Snaking across the slopes are Hunza's hallmark, the precision-made stone channels on which the valley's life depends. Carrying water from canyons to tiny, stone-walled fields 8km away, they have transformed a 'mountain desert' with few horizontal surfaces into a breadbasket. Their paths on the high rock faces are revealed by thin lines of vegetation, and patches of green are visible on the most improbable walls and ledges. Irrigation sustains orchards of Hunza's famous apricots, as well as peaches, plums, apples, grapes, cherries and walnuts (for more on Hunza cuisine see the boxed text p66). Irrigation also waters the fields of maize and wheat, and the ever-present poplars, a fast-growing source of fodder, firewood and timber.



Added to the beauty is a kind of mythology about Hunza's isolation and purity, spawned by James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, nourished in films about the lost kingdom of Shangri-la, and fostered in the 1970s by media stories of extraordinary health and longevity. The KKH itself has put an end to Hunza's isolation, and while the Garden of Eden image ignores a rather bloody history, this hardly alters Hunza's appeal.

'Hunza' is commonly (and inaccurately) used for the entire broad valley. In fact, two former princely states, Hunza and Nagyr (*nah*-gr), with shared language and ancestry, face one another across the river. Hunza refers to the villages on the north bank from Khizerabad to Ghareghat (or sometimes as far as Nazimabad). Gojal is sometimes described as part of Hunza too.

Smaller but more populous Nagyr occupies the entire south side of the valley and the north side around Chalt, and includes Rakaposhi and the lower Hispar Glacier. Although it enjoys less media fame, Nagyr is home to some of the best treks in the Karakoram (many of them set out in Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush*).

Most people here still think of themselves as subjects of their respective *mirs*, rather than as Pakistanis. And though they are very hospitable to foreigners, even in remote areas, they are not so fond of the down-land Pakistanis.

The two kingdoms also have a common language, Burushashki, but nobody is sure of where it came from. Wakhi is spoken in upper Hunza (Gojal); in Lower Nagyr (in common with Gilgit), Shina is also used. Many people speak Urdu and English.

Hunza and Nagyr also once shared the Shiite faith, but Hunza is now almost entirely Ismaili (except for Murtazaabad, Ganish and a few other pockets).

GILGIT TO CHALT

As you enter the Hunza Valley the view is dominated by the 7168m Kampire Dior, 70km north on the crest of the Karakoram.

A TALE OF SIBLINGS & RIVALRIES

The origins of the separate Hunza and Nagyr kingdoms are obscured by legend. However, they probably arose from a marriage of royal cousins in the 15th century that produced twin sons, Maglot and Girkis, later to become the rulers, respectively, of Nagyr and Hunza. From infancy, so the story goes, the little princes had a mutual hatred, and as kings they led their people into frequent bloody battles with one another. Over the centuries their royal descendants have continued the feud, even as their families intermarried.

The valley's modest agricultural output had for years been supplemented by raids on caravans between Kashgar and Kashmir, and by slave trading. Yaqub Beg, who proclaimed an independent Turkestan republic in Xinjiang in the 1860s, put a temporary end to the raids. This economic blow led Hunza and Nagyr to declare allegiance to the British-aligned Maharaja of Kashmir.

In 1886 Safdar Ali became *mir* of Hunza in accordance with the valley's age-old custom – by murdering his father and three brothers. Within two years he resumed the caravan raids and played host at Baltit Fort to a party of Russian 'explorers'. British India, spreading north from Kashmir, had grown aware of Russia expanding into Central Asia, and Hunza now began to look like a loose cannon on deck.

Britain decided to improve supply lines from Kashmir and reopen its agency at Gilgit, and inevitably became entangled in Hunza–Nagyr's bloody politics. Within five years a British–Kashmiri force had occupied the valley and installed its own *mir*, Nazim Khan, in Hunza. A British garrison remained at Aliabad until 1897. In Hunza, Nazim Khan ruled until his death in 1938, and his son Ghazan Khan until 1945.

Within weeks of the formal partition of India and Pakistan in August 1947, an uprising in Gilgit against the Maharaja of Kashmir, who had opted to join India, brought Hunza and Nagyr into Pakistan. They remained semiautonomous until 1974 when they were merged with Pakistan, reducing their rulers to district officials.

Many older Hunzakuts still fondly recall their last *mir*, Muhammad Jamal Khan, who died two years after the formal dissolution of the old princely states. His son Ghazanfar Ali still occupies the royal house in Karimabad. Nagyr's last *mir* still lives in Nagyr village.

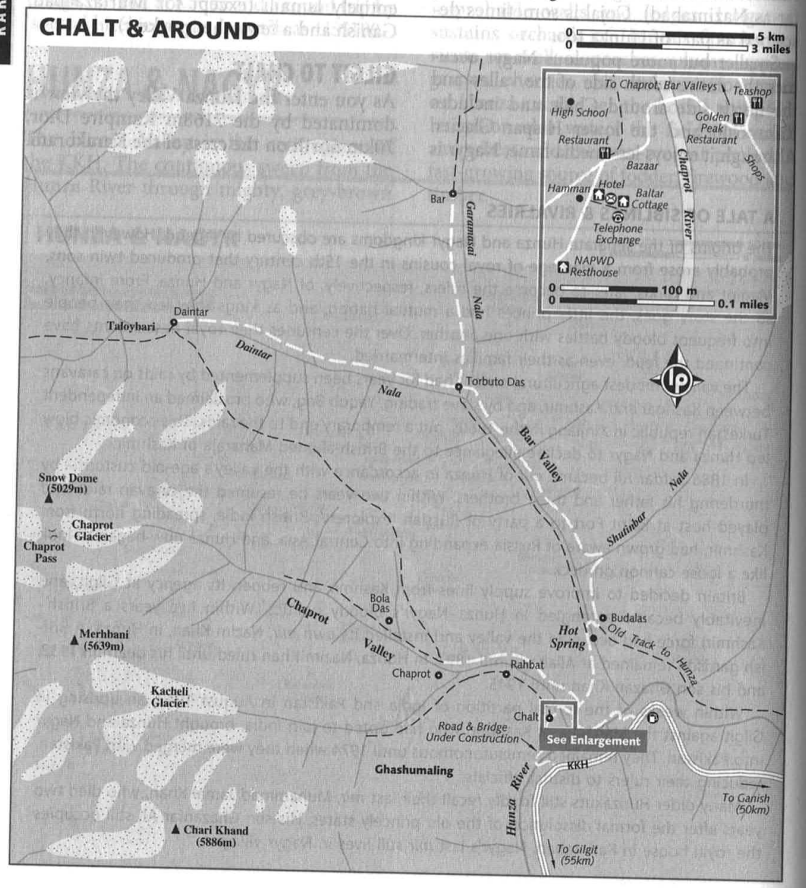
About 35 minutes (on the bus) from Gilgit is a monument to KKH workers. In Urdu on the base are words of the philosopher–poet Allama Mohammed Iqbal: 'God has given humans integrity, faith, and a strong mind, and if they set themselves to it they can kick a mountain to powder or stop a river in its tracks.' Across the river is the Naltar Valley.

Ten minutes on is a clutch of cafés and a road maintenance base called Jaglot Guar, about 42km from Gilgit. Hunza Hotel and other cafés here have charpoys and meat and rice meals. Across the river is Gwach Nala and the KKH's precarious precursor, a now-abandoned jeep road that follows the oldest caravan trails. Ten minutes on is the Chalt turn-off.

CHALT

Chalt sits in a bowl at the mouths of two large valley systems, the only part of Nagyr north of the river. Chaprot Valley is probably the most beautiful nala close to the KKH in the Northern Areas. Safdar Ali, *mir* of Hunza at the time of the British invasion, said Chalt and Chaprot were 'more precious to us than the strings of our wives' pyjamas'. Excellent treks start here and in the Bar Valley; see Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Karakoram & Hindukush* for further detail on these and other treks.

From the KKH, a jeep road crosses the river and runs 3km to 4km to Chalt, a small bazaar with shops, a post office and a telephone exchange.



Activities

SHORT TREKS AROUND CHALT

Ghashumaling

This is a lovely area in a lower Chaprot tributary, with easy trails and mulberry, peach, apple and walnut orchards. Walks can take from two hours to all day. From Chalt Bazaar take the path past the high school and up the south side of the valley. At the head of the canyon, about 12km up, are pine forests and the small Kacheli Glacier.

Chaprot Valley

From the bazaar, cross the Chaprot River and turn left. About 150m up, take the left fork, which climbs the north side of Chaprot Valley. It's an hour's walk to Chaprot village, and three to four hours from there on a mule track through summer villages to pastures at the head of the valley. In summer, horses can be hired at Chaprot.

Bar Valley

From the bazaar, cross the river, turn left and at the next fork keep right into Bar Valley (also called Garamasai or Budalas Valley). After 3km a path continues up the west side of the valley while the jeep road crosses a bridge to Budalas. On the east side, 3km upstream from the bridge, the road crosses **Shutinbar Nala**. It's a steep 8km to 10km up Shutinbar to a glacier at its head. There are abandoned ruby mines in the canyon.

Further up Bar Valley is Torbuto Das, about 13km from Chalt at the confluence of the Daintar and Garamasai (or Tutu Uns) Nalas. West past Daintar village and about 9km from Torbuto Das, in a meadow called **Taloybari**, local herders have set up a simple camping area, with food available. This is a long day's walk from Chalt; jeeps to Daintar can also be hired in Chalt.

Sleeping & Eating

Baltar Cottage in Chalt bazaar has very basic accommodation. In a walled apricot orchard, an **NAPWD resthouse** (camp sites Rs 50, d standard/VIP Rs 300/400) has a couple of rooms. In addition to meals at the resthouse by arrangement, there are shops and some small, gloomy restaurants in the bazaar.

Getting There & Away

Chalt-bound minibuses and passenger jeeps depart in the early morning from lower Khazana (Bank) Rd in Gilgit for about Rs 50, returning the next morning.

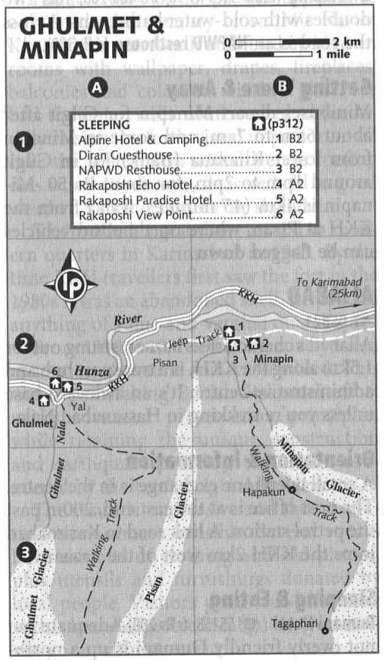
CHALT TO GHULMET

Near Chalt, the KKH runs along the edge of the 'Asian Plate', into which the Indian subcontinent ploughed 50 million years ago, creating the Himalayan chain. There's no simple line, but roughly speaking, Asia is to the north and the remnants of a chain of volcanic islands trapped between Asia and India are to the south (see boxed text, p57).

Eastwards the KKH arches around fertile **Sikanderabad**. Scratched into the walls hundreds of metres high on the north side of the valley is the 'road' that was once Hunza's link to the outside.

At **Nilt** are the ravine and remains of the fort where the 1891 British invasion nearly stalled. East of Nilt in **Thol** (pronounced tole) is a green-roofed shrine to Shah Wali, a Shiite preacher from Afghanistan who settled here in the late 18th century.

At the east end of **Ghulmet** (not to be confused with Gulmit village in Gojal) is Ghulmet Nala, above which Rakaposhi rises



in an unobscured sweep. Up the nala is a base camp for a 1979 Japanese assault on Rakaposhi. The views are outstanding, but it's a long slog with no water and poor camping. The trail begins behind the hamlet of Yal, east of the nala.

From **Pisan**, just east of Ghulmet, it's a 45-minute walk up a jeep track to **Minapin**, the start of a much finer climb to another Rakaposhi base camp and longer treks towards Diran Peak (see p363 for more details).

Sleeping & Eating

Sikanderabad has an **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300). In Ghulmet, several makeshift places crowd around the KKH bridge at Ghulmet Nala offering refreshments and basic accommodation. Rakaposhi View Point and Rakaposhi Echo Hotel have tents for a small charge, or you can pitch your own tent for free. **Rakaposhi Paradise Hotel** (d Rs 300) has four plain doubles, plus tent space for a token charge.

In Minapin, the best bet is **Diran Guesthouse** (camp sites Rs 100, dm/s/d Rs 70/400/600), in a walled orchard east of a large mosque. All rooms have private hot showers. **Alpine Hotel & Camping** (camp sites Rs 50, s/d 100/200) has two doubles with cold-water bathrooms. Across the road is an **NAPWD resthouse** (d Rs 300).

Getting There & Away

Minibuses depart Minapin for Gilgit after about 6am to 7am, and come to Minapin from lower Khazana (Bank) Rd in Gilgit around 1pm to 2pm, for about Rs 50. Minapin is 4km (45 minutes' walk) from the KKH at Pisan, where northbound vehicles can be flagged down.

ALIABAD

☎ 05821

Aliabad's characterless bazaar, strung out for 1.5km along the KKH, is a transport hub and administrative centre. It's an awkward base unless you're trekking in Hassanabad Nala.

Orientation & Information

A small telephone exchange is in the centre. The post office is at the east end, 200m past the petrol station. A link road to Karimabad joins the KKH 2km west of the bazaar.

Sleeping & Eating

Dumani Hotel (☎ 55158; tr Rs 200) Adequate but not overly friendly Dumani is up a north-heading lane that branches off the KKH at the 'Gilgit 100km' milepost.

Village Guest House (camp sites Rs 100, dm/tr Rs 50/300) At the time of research, management was planning to change its name to Guldara Hunza Guesthouse. A bed in the traditional room dorm is basically a carpet on a wooden platform. Unfortunately the carpets were overpoweringly smelly.

The Swat and Prince hotels have grotty rooms and are not interested in foreigners. West of the centre, Rakaposhi Camping Site is a walled garden with two-person tents and a small dorm, but we didn't find anyone there.

Getting There & Away

Get here from Gilgit on any Karimabad-bound transport. Minibuses leave Aliabad for Gilgit (Rs 60) all day as early as 5am and when full. Suzukis go all day to/from Ganish (Rs 5) and Karimabad (Rs 10). To catch northbound transport, Aliabad is a better choice than Ganish as minibuses tend to leave Aliabad when full.

KARIMABAD (BALTIT)

☎ 05821 / elevation 2438m

Baltit is Hunza's ancient capital. Its magnificent fort, on a throne-like ridge with Ultar Nala yawning behind it, has always been the kingdom's focal point. The fort served as the royal palace for over 750 years until last century, when sounder quarters were built below in what came to be called Karimabad. The name is now also used for Baltit and the complex of ancient tribal hamlets around it.

Since the arrival of KKH tourism and overseas aid, Karimabad has prospered and the bazaar has filled with hotels, restaurants, travel agencies and handicraft shops. The superb setting, the grand fort, good food, friendly locals and the opportunity to swap tales with other highway travellers make Karimabad an ideal stopover.

Orientation

Karimabad is perched high above the KKH. Vehicle access from the KKH includes New Ganish Rd to the lower end of the bazaar from just west of Ganish, and a mostly paved road to the top of the bazaar from just west of Aliabad. Old Ganish Rd, the original access road from Ganish, is now a footpath.

ISMAILI ISLAM

An 8th-century split among Shiites, who disagreed on which son of the sixth imam (Muslim religious leader) should succeed him, gave rise to the Ismaili (Maulai) branch of Islam. For Ismaili Shiites, the line of imams continues into the present. Ismailis today number several million in pockets of Pakistan (namely Hunza and Gojal), India, East Africa, Iran and Syria, and their present leader (since 1957), Prince Karim Aga Khan, is considered to be imam No 49. Doctrines are more esoteric and practices less regimented than those of Ithnashari Shiites or Sunnis. The style of prayer is a personal matter (eg there is no prostration), the mosque is replaced by a community hall called a *jamaat khana* and women are less secluded. The present Aga Khan has considerably modernised Ismaili life and set up institutions to bring social and political security to the scattered Ismaili communities.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Baltit Book Centre (Bazaar) Has a respectable collection of Northern Areas and Central Asia books in English.

EMERGENCY

Hospital (Old Ganish Rd)

Police There is usually a police presence at Zero Point, below Darbar Hunza Hotel.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet café (per hr Rs 150-600, depending on time of day) At the time of research there was one Internet café in town charging exorbitant rates and providing a tenuous and dead-slow connection via Gilgit.

MONEY

Alam Money Changer (⏲ 8am-8pm) In the lower bazaar, has better cash rates and accepts most currencies.

National Bank (New Ganish Rd; ⏲ 9am-1pm Mon-Thu, 9am-noon Fri & Sat) Accepts US dollars and UK pounds cash or travellers cheques.

POST

Post Office (⏲ 9am-4pm Mon-Thu, 9am-12.30pm Fri & Sat) Located along the back road to Aliabad, about 700m northwest of the bazaar's centre.

TELEPHONE

Telephone Exchange (Old Ganish Rd; ⏲ 24hr)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Concordia Expeditions (☎ 57181) A trekking agency up the road from Hill Top Hotel's gate.

Travel Walji's (☎ 57203) Travel & trekking agency atop Tourist Park Hotel.

Sights & Activities

BALTIT FORT

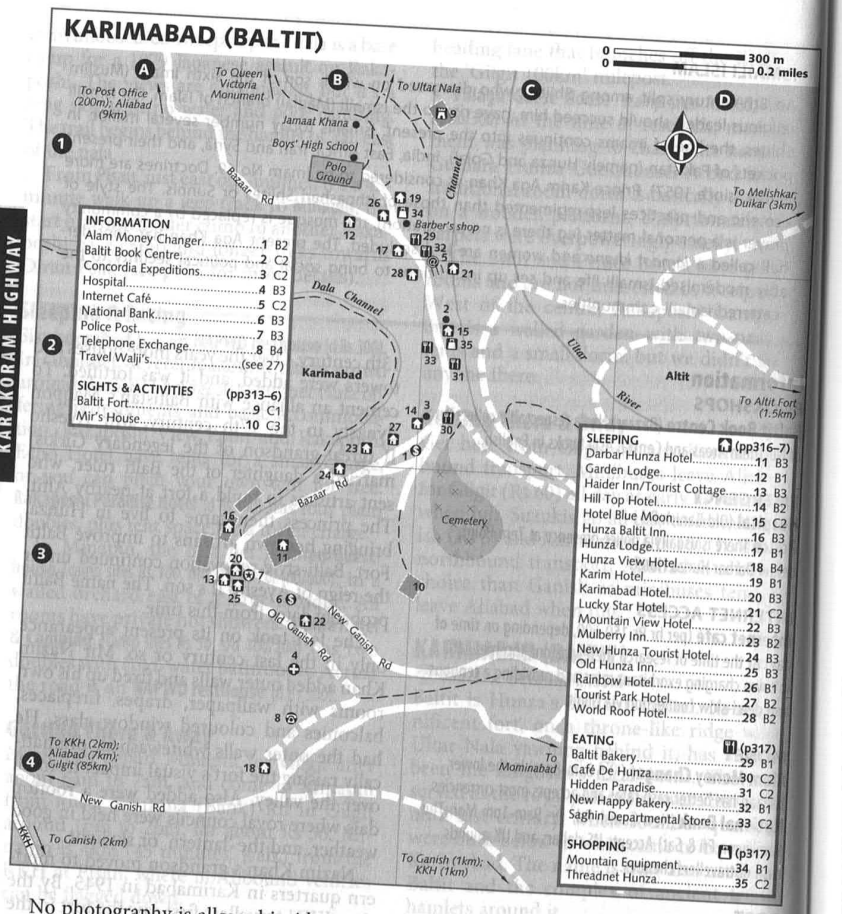
The oldest parts of the **fort** (Rs 300; ⏲ 9am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Apr-Oct, 9.30am-4pm Nov-Mar) date from the 13th century. Over the years more houses and towers were added, and it was fortified. To cement an alliance with Baltistan's Maqpon dynasty in the 17th century, Mir Ayesho II (great-grandson of the legendary Girkis) married a daughter of the Balti ruler, who sent artisans to build a fort at nearby Altit. The princess then came to live in Hunza, bringing her own artisans to improve Baltit Fort. Balti-style renovation continued under the reign of Ayesho II's son. The name Baltit probably dates from this time.

The fort took on its present appearance only in the last century or so. Mir Nazim Khan added outer walls and fixed up his own rooms with wallpaper, drapes, fireplaces, balconies and coloured window glass. He had the outer walls whitewashed, dramatically raising the fort's visual impact from all over the valley. Also added were a rooftop dais where royal councils were held in good weather, and the 'lantern' or skylight.

Nazim Khan's grandson moved to modern quarters in Karimabad in 1945. By the time KKH travellers first saw the fort in the 1980s it was an abandoned shell, stripped of anything of value and verging on collapse.

From 1990 to 1996 it was effectively taken apart stone by stone and reassembled. This was a painstaking British–Pakistani effort using advanced preservation principles, while retaining the unique construction and earthquake-proofing techniques pioneered by the fort's original builders.

The result is impressive and the renovation work almost invisible. Several rooms have exhibits of clothing and old photos, plus utensils and furnishings donated by local people. Visitors get a half-hour tour with a knowledgeable local guide (you cannot go in without one).



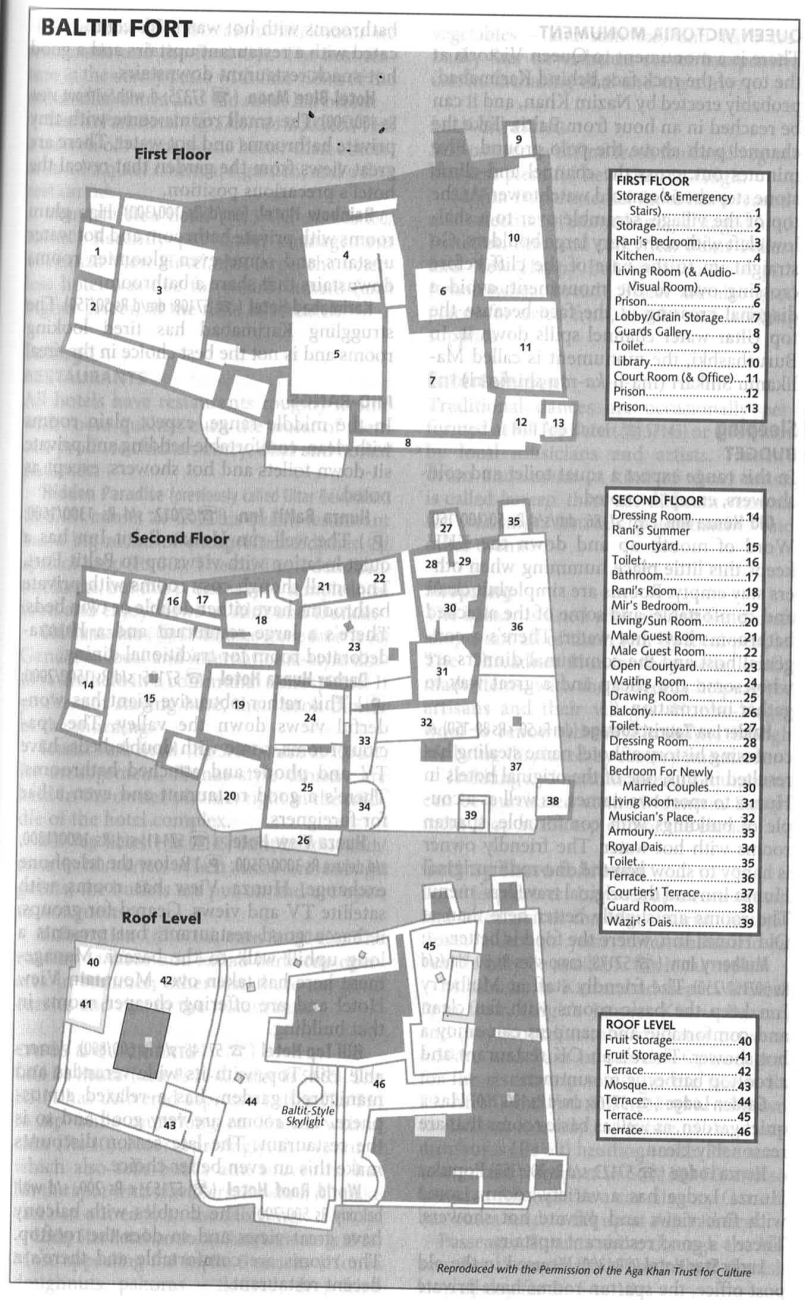
No photography is allowed inside. Tickets are sold at a small kiosk below the fort.

MOMINABAD

In the Northern Areas there are traces of an ancient caste system, in which musicians and artisans ranked low. In the past they were often segregated in their own separate villages. Though it's quite ordinary looking, Mominabad (old name Berishal), near a turn on the Ganish–Karimabad road, was such a village. Its people even speak their own dialect, Berishki.

CHANNEL WALKS

A three- or four-hour walk along the main water channels from Ultar Nala is a good way to see Hunza at its best. Try to avoid the delicate side channels.

Climb past the polo field, bearing left beside the channel there. The path goes down the valley all the way to Hyderabad Nala. There, scramble down to the link road and turn back towards Karimabad. You can soon drop to a lower channel that goes all the way back. You can go right on around Karimabad, past Mominabad to the headworks behind Baltit Fort, although the channel goes underground for part of the way.

Both channels distribute water from Ultar. There are seven channels running to the west and five to the east from Ultar Nala. The velvety appearance of Ultar water is the result of minute flakes of mica.