

A trip through PAKISTAN

By Barry Hoffner

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wife several years earlier, was learning how often our perceptions of places collapse once we finally see them and develop real impressions.

came Nanga Parbat, Pakistan's second-highest mountain, towering over 26,000 feet.

“Are you sure you want to go to Pakistan with me?” My college friend Lee paused for a second on the phone before answering.

A few weeks later, Lee and I boarded a small flight from Islamabad into Pa-

“Holy moly,” Lee muttered beside me. It looked less like a commercial flight and more like a mountaineering documentary unfolding beneath us.

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s exactly why I want to go.”

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I laughed. For months, Lee had been telling me he wanted to join one of the trips on my journey to visit every country in the world. When I finally sent him my 2024 itinerary, I expected him to choose somewhere easier — maybe a tropical island in the Pacific or some other comfortable stop. Instead, he chose Pakistan.

“There are definitely simpler options,” I reminded him. “Palau. The Marshall Islands. São Tomé. Beaches and an easy itinerary.” But Lee wasn’t budging. “No,” he said. “I want something completely outside my comfort zone.”

Like many Americans, much of what I associated with Pakistan came filtered through decades of headlines: terrorism, Taliban strongholds, political instability, and the 2011 raid that killed Osama bin Laden. Even as an experienced traveller who had already visited places like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen, I carried unconscious assumptions about what Pakistan might feel like.

Yet part of the deeper purpose behind my journey to every country in the world, a journey that began during Covid as a way to heal after the loss of my

kistan’s mountainous far north. About an hour into the flight, conversation inside the cabin faded as passengers turned toward the windows. Below us rose massive snow-covered peaks so enormous they barely seemed real. One after another emerged through the clouds — jagged ridgelines, glaciers, impossible walls of ice and rock. Then

We had entered the realm where the Himalayas, Karakoram, and Hindu Kush mountain ranges converge — one of the most spectacular landscapes on Earth. Pakistan contains more than 100 peaks above 23,000 feet. For comparison, the United States has only one above 20,000. The scale was almost disorienting.

Over the following days, our guide, Manzoor, drove us along



sections of the famed Karakoram Highway, often called the "Eighth Wonder of the World." Carved through cliffs and mountain valleys, the highway snakes north toward the Chinese border through terrain so dramatic it often felt imaginary.

Villages clung impossibly to mountainsides. Glacial rivers thundered below us in shades of turquoise I didn't know existed in nature. At times, massive rockslides narrowed the road to little more than a ledge. And everywhere we went, people welcomed us. That may sound simplistic, but it became impossible to ignore.

In village after village, men placed their hands over their hearts as we passed.

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Children shouted greetings. Shopkeepers invited us for tea. One afternoon, we stopped for a roadside haircut and shave that cost less than a dollar. Even there, laughter quickly replaced awkwardness once people learned we were Americans. The warmth felt genuine rather than a performance.

One day, Manzoor arranged for us to visit a small private K-12 school tucked into one of the mountain valleys. Tuition there costs roughly ten dollars a month, still difficult for many families in the region to afford. When the principal heard about my travels, he asked whether I would speak to a tenth-grade class.

I expected polite silence. Instead, after sharing stories from my journey for fifteen minutes, the students erupted with questions as if I had asked, "Who likes ice cream?"

"What do you think of Pakistan?"; "What does America think about us?"; "Are there leaders you admire?"

Then came the kind of questions that catch you off guard because they reveal both curiosity and seriousness beneath youthful faces.



"What's the meaning of life?" Lee turned toward me, grinning. "Good luck with that one," he whispered.

I told the students I was still figuring that question out myself. Then the conversation shifted toward Gaza, Israel, and American foreign policy. The boys wanted to understand how Americans

viewed the conflict and why the United States supported Israel so strongly. Their questions weren't hostile. They were thoughtful, informed, and emotionally invested. I tried to answer honestly while acknowledging complexity rather than pretending certainty.

What struck me most wasn't simply the conversation itself, but where it was happening: inside a modest classroom in a remote mountain region thousands of miles from Washington DC or Jerusalem.

The internet had connected these students to the wider world in ways unimaginable a generation earlier. That realization felt both inspiring and unsettling.

Technology can expand understanding, but it can also deepen division. Pakistan itself knows this tension well. Not far from where we travelled lies the Swat Valley, home of Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai, who was shot by the Taliban for advocating girls' education and still faces threats preventing her safe return home. Travel often reminds me that places rarely fit neatly into moral categories. Pakistan certainly didn't.

There was breathtaking beauty here alongside obvious inequality. Deep hospitality alongside visible conservatism. Progress mixed with unresolved tensions.

One afternoon, we found ourselves stuck in traffic near a small mountain town. Curious about the commotion ahead, we asked Manzoor to stop. To our astonishment, a regional beach-volleyball championship was underway. At nearly 10,000 feet elevation and roughly 1,500 miles from the nearest ocean.

As a former volleyball player myself, I wandered towards the court. Hundreds of spectators surrounded the makeshift arena, many dressed in traditional shalwar kameez. An official spotted us and enthusiastically waved us into a VIP seating area near centre court. The crowd greeted us with smiles and hand-over-heart gestures.

For the next hour, Lee and I watched intensely competitive volleyball unfold beneath towering mountain peaks while vendors sold tea and roasted corn nearby. At one point, I looked over at Lee, who just days earlier had worried aloud about whether he should pack protein bars for Pakistan. Now he sat laughing with local spectators while cheering on teams whose names he couldn't pronounce.

"This trip," he told me, "has already changed the way I think about travel." I knew exactly what he meant.

One of the great hidden rewards of difficult travel is that it dismantles abstraction. Countries stop being headlines. People stop being stereotypes. The world regains texture and humanity.

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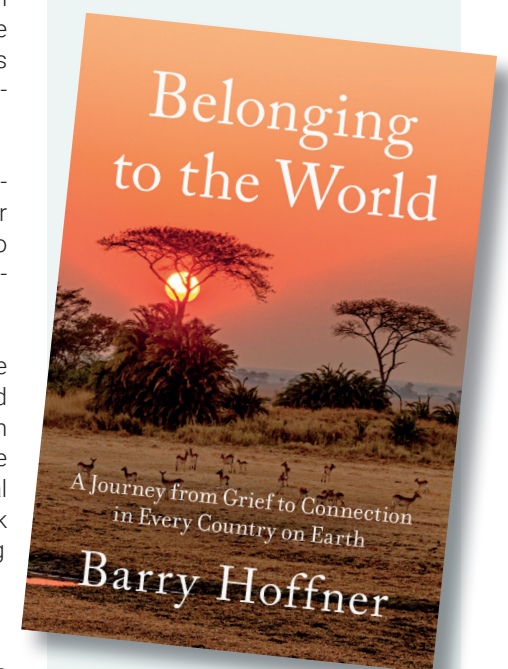
Pakistan did not erase every concern or contradiction I carried into the trip. Nor should it have. The absence of women in many public spaces was impossible to ignore. Conversations about politics and religion occasionally revealed tensions simmering beneath the surface.

But meaningful travel isn't about confirming simple narratives — positive or negative. It's about allowing places to become more complicated, more human, and therefore more real.

As our journey continued through the mountains of northern Pakistan, I found myself thinking back to the students in that classroom. What impressed me most wasn't their knowledge of global affairs. It was their willingness to ask difficult questions while remaining open to hearing imperfect answers. That may be one of the most valuable lessons travel offers any of us. Understanding does not always align with agreement. It begins with curiosity strong enough to cross discomfort, uncertainty, and distance.



Barry is the author of *Belonging to the World* and was recently named the 2026 "Most Purposeful Traveler" by Nomad-Mania. He has visited every country in the world (except North Korea, which he will visit soon), including all the highest-risk "Level 4: Do Not Travel" regions. His firsthand experiences challenge one-dimensional narratives, revealing the complexity, resilience, and humanity that exist alongside very real danger.



Junction point of three mountain ranges in Pakistan: Himalayas, Hindu Kush and Karakoram