

Friday March 4, 2005

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**The theatre of war**

February 26, 2005

Sydney Morning Herald



Taste of Lahore ... the exotic fare in Food Street. Photo: Eleanor Limprecht

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**Destination:** [Asia](#)

At the border between hostile neighbours India and Pakistan, the guards put on a fine show. Eleanor Limprecht reports.

From communalist violence to border disputes and threats of nuclear war, India and Pakistan have had a tumultuous history since their partition in 1947.

Though the bitter rivals have made recent inroads towards peace, their animosity can still be witnessed at the Wagah border at sunset every evening, when soldiers from each side march and shake their guns in a menacing - but bordering on ridiculous - spectacle that draws hundreds of spectators.

Both countries have built stadium seating for the crowds and taxi drivers make a lucrative business shuttling tourists from Amritsar, a border town in the Indian state of Punjab. Families bring picnics and cheer on the soldiers as they stomp their feet, puff out their chests and lower their national flags in a clearly contemptuous spectacle.

But rarely do these tourists actually cross the border, so it is with some trepidation that my friend and I walk

through the six sets of gates and four passport checks to spend a few days in Lahore.

A week earlier we had lined up for visas at the Pakistani embassy in New Delhi and booked our train tickets to Amritsar.

Tell people in India that you are crossing the border into Pakistan and they shake their heads in horror. "Oh, no," said the dignified-looking Sikh on the train. "Why would you want to do that? India is very beautiful - much more safe. None of these terrorist sleeper cells, no Osama bin Laden."

The Indian border guards are not very encouraging, either. "I hope you come back soon," one says. "You will find it is not as nice as India." His friend adds: "They eat too much meat - it makes them violent."

But the Pakistani border guards do their best to quell any fears. "This is the most beautiful country. You will never want to leave," says the one with the bushy moustache after offering to change Indian rupees. He pulls a wad of bills the size of my fist from his vest and wets his thumb and forefinger to count out a stack of Pakistani rupees. I know better than to ask him for a receipt.

The first thing you notice in Pakistan is the trucks. While trucks in India are shades of grey and Delhi rickshaws are painted yellow and green, every truck in Pakistan is a work of art.

In a country where alcohol is illegal and women have to cover up, a man can go wild decorating his truck. Brightly painted and covered with baubles, bells and painted tigers, trucks in Pakistan have nothing in common with the lifeless semi-trailers that populate Australian roads. Their horns play popular tunes at ear-piercing decibels, more as entertainment for the driver than a warning to oncoming motorists.

Bus and auto rickshaw drivers decorate their vehicles with as much gusto. How much gold paint and kitsch art can they fit onto a metal frame? Plenty. And the interiors are just as extreme - I rode an auto rickshaw with a disco ball swinging from the ceiling and a driver who was so busy playing DJ that he took his eyes off the road. Despite my protests, he rewound and fast-forwarded his cassette tapes to find just the right tune for the journey.

Since the trip to Lahore from the border takes a little over half an hour, we opt for a taxi from Wagah, anticipating the sweet, cool of the air-conditioning on our sweaty skin. The driver, unfortunately, has something else in mind. "A/c 200 rupee extra," he says, wagging his finger at us in the rearview mirror.

So instead we sit in a growing pool of sweat, despite 200 rupees equalling just under \$5. Here it is a small fortune. A taxi from the border to Lahore costs about 400 rupees (\$9). That's minus the a/c, of course. There is a bus that takes an hour and delivers you to the Lahore Central Railway Station for 10 rupees (about 25 cents). It definitely doesn't have a/c.

Despite the lack of Western tourists in Lahore, there are facilities ranging from a five-star Holiday Inn to backpacker hostels. The best option in any city is to stay with the locals, and luckily an acquaintance invites us to stay in her family's home.

Only 24, this brilliant girl from a wealthy military family is already a divorcee from her arranged marriage two years earlier. Divorce is still rare in Pakistan and much looked down upon. Despite having her mother's support, this young woman had to fight to get a divorce and then beg her ultra-traditional father to let her move back into the family home. "At least they've given up on trying to marry me off," she says.

A few days in Lahore will dissolve all preconceptions of Pakistan. A sprawling, cosmopolitan city, it combines ornate Mughal palaces with the white bungalows and wide streets of the British colonial past.

In the morning you can walk through dusty, narrow alleys of the old city, dodging lepers and starving stray cats, and in the afternoon visit one of the gleaming, air-conditioned malls to shop for clothes at French Connection and drink coffee at Starbucks.

Visiting Shahi Qila, the Lahore Fort, during the heat of the day, we find a guide who speaks perfect English and is well versed in history. He wears a grease-stained salwar kameez - the national dress, a light cotton tunic and drawstring pants - paired with a McDonald's cap. I wonder if he is moonlighting at one of the many McDonald's restaurants fringing the city.

The cool of the evening is the perfect time to visit Food Street, a wide thoroughfare lined with vendors selling food in the Old Anarkali bazaar. The smell of grilled mutton and fresh bread greets you from a block away. Giant barbecues hold skewers of mutton, chicken and goat, while bubbling vats of oil offer up golden samosas and the Lahori specialty, fried river fish.

There are glass cases of pastel, milky sweets with young boys fanning away the flies, a man squeezing limes for fresh lime soda and a paan wallah selling colourfully wrapped packets of this after-dinner treat.

Wrapped in a betel leaf, paan can be made sweet, savoury, sweet-savoury, or any of the above with tobacco. Paan, my friend tells me, is why all the men's beards are red, from chewing and spitting the juices onto the street. I try a sample, but the flavours are too unfamiliar and strong, like eating a chunk of perfume rolled in curry.

Eating happens late in Lahore, and at 10pm the crowds are just flowing into Cooco's Den, a restaurant overlooking the Badshahi mosque. The mosque and fort are brilliantly lit at night, surprising in a city that still suffers daily power outages.

The restaurant is in the home of Iqbal Hussein, an artist who has made his living painting women from the red light district of Lahore, the Heera Mandi. He was raised in this house, which used to be a brothel run by his mother and sisters. His paintings decorate the walls: huge canvases of voluptuous, sad-eyed women brushing their hair or lounging on sofas.

Despite having found success in the art world, Hussein has turned his childhood home into a restaurant, and the top three levels of tables are on terraced rooftops with a breathtaking view of the city. Young men work the grills and tandoori oven on the street below while waiters lift the food in wicker baskets over the side of the roof.

The waiter is concerned by our lack of male guardians, and gives us a lone table on the highest terrace, overlooking the rest of the scene.

The plates piled high with grilled chicken and lamb are eaten with fingers and folds of warm naan - no knives and forks here. Despite barely enough light to see your food, and warm Sprite instead of wine, the food is divine, especially for a meat eater just over the border from India.

Crossing back into India the next day, the border guards are anxious to hear of the trip. The Indian customs officer checking our bags reads the jackets of the novels by Bapsi Sidhwa and Mohsin Hamid, Pakistani authors whose books are available in Lahore. India gets few books and no newspapers from Pakistan and I wonder if he is curious.

"Have you ever been there?" I ask, gesturing across the rolls of razor wire. "No, but we are much better at cricket," he says, grinning, as he hands back our bags.

## Destination Lahore

### STAYING THERE

Lahore Holiday Inn, in the city business centre, has a pool, sauna and fitness centre. From \$120 a night. Phone (0011 92 42) 631 0077.

Pearl Continental, on the mall opposite Governor House, also has a pool, bidets and all the other comforts that come with a five-star hotel. About \$180 a night. Phone 636 0210.

Regale Internet Inn is cheap, cheerful and popular with Western backpackers. About \$5 a night. Phone 731 1987.

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