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Destination Pakistan

A hundred beats
By Fatima Bhutto

A mere forty miles from Karachi lies Banbhore, the entry point of Mohammad bin Qasim into Sindh in the eighth century. Though little remains of Banbhore, save for some bricks and flat earthen tiles, there are traces of the once diverse settlement that conjure up an imagination of what must have been a magnificent civilization on the banks of the river Indus, in fact it is at Banbhore that one can tread across the foundation of the very first mosque to have been built in South Asia. Prior to the entry of Islam into Sindh, however, Banbhore was populated by Parthian and later Hindu-Buddhist people and was a vital trading point in the subcontinent. Inside the museum's sunlit cases are glazed blue and white pottery from China, tiles of Islamic calligraphy written in Kufic Iraqi script, local clay urns with inbuilt water filters and miniature ivory and terracotta jewellery.

Multicultural Banbhore was the first stop on a tour I took through the interior of Sindh with two friends. Laleh was visiting from India and getting her city visas to amble around the interior was no small battle, while Sophie, a friend of mine from SOAS in London, had never been to Pakistan before. I was determined to show my guests that we are more than just a CNN terror alert -- not that they believed it anyway -- but I had already set the challenge for myself. We live in a country with such a dynamic pulse; what better way to discover that vibrancy than to drive thirteen hours into the heartland of Sindh?

"This is the largest lake in Pakistan." We would hear this uttered at two other lakes on our journey. Every lake in the interior of Sindh is indisputably the largest lake in Pakistan and standing at each and every soil bank you quite believe the repetitively grandiose claims. My brother, the passionate environmentalist, insisted we visit Haleji Lake on our pilgrimage around Sindh and it was our second stop after Banbhore. Haleji lake is a Sindh Wildlife conservation site and a Ramsar protected wetland area, along with Keenjhar lake in Thatta (also the largest lake in Pakistan, albeit an artificially enlarged one). Migratory birds flock to Haleji and facilities for bird watching -- and crocodile watching for the more adventurous sorts -- are set up along the reservoir. Besides the birds and toothy reptiles, families carrying oversize picnic baskets and school children out on field trips dot the Haleji landscape.

Thatta, the former capital of Sindh in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is in many ways still the cultural capital of the province. It is where traditional Sindhi ajrak block printing is done at its best, where the island shrine of the mythic princess Nuri -- a fishermaid made royal by marriage to the Samma King of Thatta in the fourteenth century -- lies buried in the middle of the very large Keenjhar

lake, and where the wonders of Makli Hills are found. One of the largest necropolises in the world (surely you have noticed a trend developing) Makli hills is said to contain over a million graves and over 100,000 tombs of Sufi saints, dating back to the mid-fourteenth century.

As we alighted from our car and walked towards the burial place of Jam Nizamuddin, the Samma Rajput Muslim leader and patron of the arts whose tomb bore motifs from the catalogue of Hindu artistic aesthetics, a fakir wearing a long black robe and bright orange turban sat on the desert sand surrounded by cacti and sang 'Dham dhamadam must Qalandar'. Makli Hills is a United Nations World Heritage site and the restoration work completed between 1972-74 is a testament to what a unique treasure this (largest) necropolis is to Pakistan. Our guide squinted in the afternoon sun to point out which blocks of floral carved sandstone were the original and which were the restored pieces. We novices could barely tell the difference.

By pure serendipity we drove through the night reaching Bhit Shah, the mound of the king, in Hyderabad just as the annual urs of Shah Abdul Latif was commencing. The promenade to the shrine of the saint, who forsook all the material comforts of his privileged birth to devote his life to the poor and pen poetry inspired by the divine, was littered with stalls selling everything from Mao, a fluffy white mithai made from milk, to Surf washing detergent. Even Motorola stationed a truck plastered with Abhishek Bachan's soulful gaze to hawk their merchandise. USAID had a stall as did Saathi contraceptives. It was quite a set up.

No serious corporation seemed willing to miss the mela. Shah Abdul Latif's shrine, which is the only Sufi shrine in Pakistan to hold post sunset qawwalis everyday of the year, was lit up in white, red, and green fairy lights and packed with people. Inside men in black were beating their hands against their chests and singing verses of the saint's poems -- considered to be the greatest poetry written in the Sindhi language -- while women and children lit sandalwood and rose incense before they placed their belongings on the floor and embarked upon the night's ecstatic homage and remembrance.

After a pit stop in Larkana, we set back on the road the following day tracing our steps home down the Indus River. At midday we rowed alongside the houseboats floating on Manchar Lake -- the actual largest in Pakistan, possibly even Asia -- where the sky merges with the water and ate palla, local Sindhi fish prepared by the fisherfolk, and Siberian duck which had unwittingly escaped the Russian winter only to become our lunch. At the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan Sharif it was not the Sufi mystics who commanded attention, but Sophie. As we exited the golden gates of the shrine, gifted by the Shah of Iran, a man burst up from his devotional pose and pointed at her, proclaiming loudly in English "There! It looks like the Jemima!"

The last stop on our mammoth road trip took us to Rannikot, a fort built on a trade route along the Kirthar Range stretching across the Sindh-Balochistan divide. We were told, in keeping with tradition, that Rannikot had been heralded as the largest fort in the world. It really is. Its magnificence is second to none and the mythology surrounding the fort is shrouded with intrigue. Some claim Rannikot was constructed by conquering Arabs, others insist it was the Sassanians or maybe the Greeks. Our guide, an old man in a dusty navy shalwar kameez, told us it was Darius the Great who oversaw the building of the fort complex. The enigma has not yet been solved, but two millennia after its assumed construction, Rannikot stands proud and tall over the desert range of Sindh.

This year Pakistan's ministry of tourism has revamped itself to present "Destination Pakistan 2007". Festivals and fairs around the country have been announced and the ministry is keen to promote an alternate Pakistan -- one that is unique in its splendour and novel in its preservation of our nation's heritage. I didn't see 'Destination Pakistan 2007' banners at any of the landmarks I visited, perhaps I missed them. You shouldn't. Spread the word: as the ministry says, "It's beautiful. It's Pakistan". The interior of our country certainly is the destination for 2007. I think Sophie and Laleh would agree.