Travel Guide for Pakistan

By Saadia Baber, Xperience Pakistan

Introduction to Pakistan

Pakistan is a destination which is often overlooked by tourists for its neighbouring countries India & Sri Lanka, yet the country is equally exotic & rich with culture, traditions, natural beauty, great food & history. Pakistan like so many destinations has a varied topography from North to South with weather conditions varying significantly between the North & South. Pakistan has the most impressive fashion and home interior designers, one only has to visit boutiques like Elan, which dressed Princess Kate when she visited Pakistan in October 2019, to see some of the fusion fashion in the country, taking inspiration from the West and the East. Whilst many consider Pakistan to be an under developed country, it has 3 classes, the upper (Elite), lower and middle class but the gap between the upper and lower class is significant. The homes of the Elite are of another level from the vast land they sit on, to the chandeliers which hang from the ceilings and antiques which can be found in them, conversely the poor often don’t have enough to feed all their family resorting to many poorer families in the villages having to get their daughters married at an early age. However what is synonymous between all classes is their hospitality, Pakistani’s are naturally very warm and welcoming people, opening their homes to anyone, particularly tourists for they appreciate you visiting their country. Pakistan is predominantly a Muslim country so you will see several mosques dotted around, however wearing a scarf is not compulsory for women, in more remote areas you will see there is more of an inclination to cover up for women and this would be advisable for tourists to avoid uncomfortable glaring looks but in key cities like Lahore, Islamabad & Karachi this is less prevalent, with many also wearing western attire, as they tend to be more cosmopolitan.

History of Pakistan

When the British entered the sub-continent via the Tea trade in 1608, no one could have imagined what a great impact this would have on the whole region. At the time the hindus and muslims lived peacefully side by side with many considering each other their brother or sister, their common enemy were the British, who over time started gaining military strength and finally in 1858 under Queen Victoria becoming the rulers of India. One could argue that had it not been for the British rule today there may not have been a Pakistan. The British used the tactic ‘Divide & Conquer’ to enable them to gain control and rule over the people of India, they would deliberately fuel and highlight differences between the Muslims & Hindu’s resulting in them starting to develop a mistrust between each other and attacking one another. Suddenly the love they had for one another was forgotten. It was off the back of these attacks against the Muslims that Muslim League was formed, a party created to fight for the rights for the Muslims. Previously to this there was only one party by the name of Congress, which was a nationalist party formed in 1885 to stand against the British. From the 19th century under the leadership of Mahatma Ghandi it became a key driving force for India’s independence. At the start Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan was also a member of the party believing in the Two Nation Theory, whilst many Muslims were starting to talk about there being a need for a separate country for the Muslims, so they could practise their faith freely without the fear of persecution, Mr Jinnah like Gandhi was against the break up of India and believed that after the British left, the two faiths could live side by side as two nations. However when policies put forward at Congress to protect the muslims were being sidelined or ignored, Jinnah started to realise that a two nation theory upon the British departure was just not viable and so on 23rd March 1940 at the Minar-e-Pakistan, in Lahore a famous speech was delivered by Muhammed Ali Jinnah that following the exit of the British from India, there was a need for a separate nation, which would be made up of the provinces in which there was a majority of Muslims. At this point the British were losing ground and needed as many able bodies as possible to help them on the ground to fight Germany, Muhammed Ali Jinnah stated that he would only rally the Muslims to support the British if they agreed to give them the separate country they were demanding. Originally there was a time line of 7-9 months over which the partition would take place, however much like what we saw in Afghanistan, timelines changed and the British left very abruptly resulting in much bloodshed both amongst the Muslims and Hindu’s. On 14th August 1947, Pakistan became the first country to be founded on the premise of Islam & at the time became the largest Muslim state in the world. It’s creation was a catalyst for the largest demographic movement in recorded history. Around 17 million people Hindu’s, Sikhs & Muslims were reported to move in both directions. Some moving to join families, others moving for fear of becoming a minority. 60m of the 95m Muslims in India, came to Pakistan with the remainder choosing to stay in India either because they were unable to move or because of business commitments.

Since its existence governance of Pakistan has fluctuated between democracy and Army rule, with key dominating parties Muslim League and People’s Party, over time these parties are being run more like family dynasties rather than democratic parties. Muslim League tends to be dominated by leadership from the Sharif Family and People’s Party being led by the Bhutto family. In April 1996, a new party was founded by the name of Pakistan Tehrrek-e-Insaf (PTI) led by Imran Khan, who had enough of the politics of the country which was increasingly becoming corrupt and leading to the power of the two families, using his popularity amongst the people of the country & his passion and desire to bring about change, he stood to become the voice for the common man bringing justice and rebuilding Pakistan to be run on Islamic principles, having a welfare state, investing back in the country. In 2018 he finally came into power, however following a few misguided incidents he was ousted out of power in April 2022 with a vote of no confidence motion. It is believed that this was fuelled by the West because they were not liking the fact that he had visited Putin following his attack on Ukraine.

Where to Stay in Pakistan

This all depends on what you want from your holiday. The North of Pakistan Hunza, Chitral, Gilgit, Skardu, Swat & Nathia Gali are great for nature lovers as it is made up of beautiful snow capped mountain peaks. The province of Gilgit Baltistan is home to nine of the highest mountains in the world, of which Nanga Parbat also known as Killer mountain is one of them. In the valley of Naran & Swat found in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa which is NW of Pakistan, the mountains are more green, made up of beautiful tall pine trees. In the winters you can visit the Ski resort in Malamjabba in Swat, which is great for Ski lovers with basic skills, it may be too tame for the more experienced skiers.

If its history & culture you love than the valleys of Chitral & Bhumburat valley are home to the Kalash community, an indigenous tribe, considered to be descendants of Alexander the Great, which can be seen in their features which tend to be blonde hair and blue eyed. They are a dying community and the government of Pakistan is making an effort to protect them and their practises. They have 3 famous festivals a year, which are celebrated based on the changing seasons. These are Uchal festival, Chilam Joshi & Chaumus Festival. The famous grounds of Shandur can be found here, which is the highest polo ground in the world. It is most famous for its annual Shandur polo festival, which takes place in the middle of July every year with teams from neighbouring towns and villages competing.

Peshawar, my home town, often considered to be dangerous by the Foreign Common Office in the UK, is the oldest city in the world. It is home to some famous Bollywood actors like Dilip Kumar but it is also home to some of the most hospitable and warm people you will find in the world. It is a small town compared to Lahore and Karachi & is more conservative. If you are a food lover or enjoy history then, the food street and Sethi Mohalla, which is home to 7 of the greatest architectural homes in the world, now a world heritage site are must see attractions. The homes were made by the Sethi family one of the most successful traders of the area until they lost everything when the Russian Rouble crashed. My mother is from this lineage & we were fortunate to have stayed in one of them growing up.

Most tours of the region can be categorised into Nature / Trekking or Cultural & History, in most cases the start point tends to be Islamabad, which is the foothills of the Himalayas. For the Northern tours you start to move upwards, whilst the Cultural & history tours takes you through the South of the country covering Lahore & Karachi.

If its food, shopping, culture & history that you are interested and you only have 5 days, then Lahore is the place to visit and stay at. The city really doesn’t sleep, you can go on the streets at 3am and there is a great selection of eateries you can visit.

Whilst Karachi does sit on the Arabian Sea, compared to other destinations the offer of activities to do here are limited. You are able to do snorkelling, scuba diving and crab fishing but by no means is it a beach destination as there tend to be in other countries. Gwader is a new region, which is being developed with the help of Chinese investment and is being pitched as being the new Dubai of the area but this is quiet some time away, so if you are looking for a beach destination then Pakistan is not one for you.

Accommodation in Pakistan

Pakistan relative to its neighbouring countries is still under developed, as a resulted there is a shortage of supply of great 5 star hotels, which are matched with hygiene standards expected by the international traveller, compared to demand. The knock on effect is that holidays to Pakistan can be more expensive then neighbouring countries because the prices of 5 star hotels tends to be higher due to them often being overbooked with domestic tourism or business meetings & clients.

The Key 5 star chains in Pakistan are the Hashoo Group made up of Pearl Continental, Marriot & their slightly lower 4 star tier Hotel One. The other group is Serena, which is a chain more prevalent in Africa then perhaps Europe. The distinct features of the Serena chain is their character, in the Northern areas they have bought Forts and converted these into hotel, whilst maintaining key features of the original architecture, so personally I find they tend to have more ambience, however they are also at the top end because of this.

There are a couple of old hotels which aren’t part of a chain but run by families that are worth noting because of the experience they have to offer, when staying there. Hindukush Heights is one of these, based in Chitral it is run by one of the Princes of Chitral & his wife. It has a luxury colonial feel to it full of unique bedrooms which look out to valleys with a great chef catering for their restaurant. It is a vision of Siraj ul Mulk, who wanted to create something bespoke using local materials. It is very popular amongst the elite in Pakistan & has a beautiful swimming pool. Their daughter tends to run a 5 day Yoga retreat a couple of times a year. When you enter you can see their guest book, it has been well attended by many celebrities & high profile guests such as Princess Diana & Imran Khan. They have a sister lodge in Mastuj, which is perfect for anyone who wants a few days to escape from the outside world and just use it to self reflect, catch up on painting or reading as it is quite literally in the middle of nowhere and is often used as a stop base when going to Chitral via Hunza & Shandur Polo Grounds. Over the last 5 years they now offer Glamping lodges which tend to be popular for those attending the Polo festival which typically tends to be in the middle of July.

The second hotel is in Lahore named The Falleti’s, it is an experience in itself because of the beautiful character of the rooms and main lobby. This is another hotel where several celebrities have stayed at. It is also quiet conveniently located to access key sight seeing places such as the Shalimar gardens, Badshahi mosque, Lahore Fort etc.

The ones I have mentioned are the more established ones, however since Imran Khan came into power in 2018, when Tourism was a key focus of his, it inspired several entrepreneurs to invest and develop boutique hotels, particular because domestic tourism took off and many locals started to favour travelling within Pakistan then going to Turkey or the Maldives. The restricted movement in covid fuelled and accelerated local demand. The advantage of this was that there was an increase in beautiful resorts developed, to stay at in the North, these have been tastefully built to ensure they fit within the natural surroundings of the mountains and trees rather than ugly cement buildings. A few of my favourites are Luxus Hunza on Attabad Lake, Khoj Resorts in Skardu, Offto Resorts in Hunza, Cloud Nine and a Half in Hunza & Mountain Story in Hunza.

Most accommodations can be found & booked on [booking.com](http://booking.com), or found on instagram. Air bnb is also available in Pakistan but my past experience of this, albeit once has not been great.

In the North there are also options to do camping & also Glamping with hotels like Hindukush Heights in Mastuj, Chitral or in Hunza with Serena or Hunza Glamping resorts.

Places to visit in Pakistan

There is so much to see and do in Pakistan, I often show a video to my clients, made by a famous Vlogger Eva Zu Beck, who has travelled around Pakistan extensively. She has great content full of history and knowledge, it comes across that she is a history graduate from Oxford. She was asked by the government of Pakistan to make a video for a tourism summit aimed at hoteliers and those in the tourism industry to invest in Pakistan. What I like about [this video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeSadjRblyM) is that in 4 minutes and 30 seconds, she succinctly showcases all there is to see and do in Pakistan.

Key attractions to visit in Hunza are Altit Fort, Suspension Bridge, Fairy Meadows, Bhorat Lake, Eagle Nest & Passu Cones. The locals are fascinated with the desire to visit Khunjerab Pass, which is the border between China and Pakistan but given it takes 6 hours of your day to get there and back from upper Hunza, I would pass on this as there is nothing to see there other than a photo opportunity to say you have been there, I would rather use the day to trek or explore other more beautiful lakes with a picnic then spend the day in the car going up and down or even if its just to potter round the local bazaar, talking to the locals you will find this more enjoyable and experiential.

Other places worth visiting in the North are the Shandur Polo grounds, Bhumurat valleys where the Kalash tribe live, Jeel Saif Ul Malook in Naran, Swat, Ayubia near Murree to enjoy the chairlifts.

Mosques that must be visited are Faisal Mosque in Islamabad, Badshahi mosque & Wazir Khan mosque in Lahore, Mahabat Khan mosque.

Rhotas Fort, the famous Kewra caves also known as the Salt mines, the second largest in the world.

Mohenjo Dara known as a mud volcano which can be found in Sindh.

Katas Raj Temple, Sethi House, Katas Temple,

Things to do in Pakistan

Food in Pakistan

The food in Pakistan is varied, in the Northern areas you have popular spicy curries but you also have more bland soup based dishes made up of Yak meat and Noodles, due to their proximity to China, you can see the influence on some of the local cuisines on offer there.

In Peshawar the speciality is their chappli kebabs and Karahi Gosht, in Lahore as you visit the Walled City of Lahore, they offer some of the best breakfast dishes like nihari (A curry made up of lamb or beef shanks), halwa purri and channa battura. Karachi is home to a variety of biryani’s, you will be amazed on how many different types exist, due to it being based closer to the sea, the menus will also feature more seafood dishes.

Aside from the traditional cuisines, Pakistan is a country made up of foodies and you will find a range to incredible restaurants with great ambience and talented chefs offering Italian, Mexican, Chinese and Japanese. The Chinese is worth going to as the flavours are completely different to what you taste in the West, with American Chopsuey being a favourite dish.

A couple of incredible restaurants worth mentioning and going to especially because they offer a unique dining experience are The Poet near the badhsahi mosque as you can see the fountain show from its terrace in the evening and Haveli which is on the other side of the lawn in what used to be the red light district of Lahore now a food street. The Poet is very popular and you need to ensure you have booked in advance as it is not a place you can just turn up to.

Getting around in Pakistan

In the main cities it is fairly easy to get around using local cabs or Kareems (Pakistan’s version of Uber), you can also find metro buses operating in Peshawar, Islamabad and Lahore.

However as you leave the main cities, the infrastructure is less developed you can use the Daewoo service which is clean and reliable to get around between Lahore, Islamabad, Karachi etc.

However if you are planning to do a multi city tour, which is what many do, the best way to do this is to get a private car & driver with whom you can do this. For the North this is the only way that you can get around with comfort. The route from Islamabad to Hunza or Skardu is long and takes 2 days by road, so if time is of the essence its worth getting a domestic flight to these places and then have a local car and driver at the destination.

When is the best time to visit Pakistan

This all depends on where in Pakistan you are going, for the North I always recommend end of April to June & then between 17th August and middle of October. I avoid July and first two weeks of August because locals are on holiday so these resorts can become very congested and you can spend hours in traffic jams. Schools tend to reopen around 17th August.

For places between Lahore & Karachi I tend to suggest October to March as being the best time to visit because outside of these months it can become very hot and uncomfortable to get around, particular because some of the places to visit are exposed and out in the open desert.

Events in Pakistan

Pakistan follows the Islamic calendar which is based on the moon so every year dates go back by 10 days for Eid & the start of ramadan.

Pakistan is a muslim country so two of the biggest events are the celebration of Eid al Fitr, which follows the month of Ramadan & Eid al Adha, which takes place in the month of Hajj. In both cases 3 days of holidays are observed by the locals and in the main everything is closed.

Other significant holidays are 23rd March, which is to commemorate the passing of the Pakistan resolution in 1940, 14th August, which marks the day of independence. Milad un Nabi, 28th September, which is the birthday of the prophet Muhammed (pbuh), 9th November commemorating Iqbal Day, who was a famous poet who is believed to have put ideas of a separate nation via his poetry much before it came onto peoples radar & 25th December which celebrates Christmas Day & Quaid-e-Azam Day to commemorate the birthday of the founder of Pakistan.

All public buildings are beautifully lit up on the day of independence & Milan un Nabi.

Luxury Travel Tips

Pakistan is still a less developed tourist destination then many of its neighbouring countries, so many 5 star hotels may well be the equivalent of 4 stars elsewhere as the infrastructure is still being developed, however there are some hidden gems waiting to be discovered from old & new.

The Faletti’s Hotel, in Lahore, is a unique blend of old & new, having successfully preserved its past grandeur to provide its guests with a lifetime memory. It is an incredible medley of Victorian, Colonial and Art Deco styles in its interiors. The spacious guest rooms and sparkling marble floors are a constant reminder of the elegance of the colonial era. The “Greatest of Personalities” in the history of Pakistan have walked the corridors of the hotel and shared the most daring ideas over a cup of tea in its restaurant and lounges.

If its Golfing you enjoy and are looking for a retreat with Sauna & great sports facilities than Defence Raya Country Club is a great option. They have an in house chef who is able to cook many international cuisines, their bedrooms ooze opulence & they also have an in-house cinema room, tennis courts, spa facilities, gym & pool table.

If you like something more quirky with a boutique feel then Ambiance Boutique Art Hotel has a great art deco feel to it, full of vibrant colour and can be found in Karachi.

Food is at the heart of Pakistan’s culture & society and so there are so many great eateries to choose from. A few favourites are The Poet (Lahore) by Minor - E - Pakistan, a true dining experience, serves traditional Pakistani cuisine, Kolachi (Karachi) looking out to the beach specialising in traditional Pakistani & international cuisine, Monal in Islamabad, Cafe Crunch in Peshawar & Lal Qila in Karachi, Hyderabad & Lahore.

Pakistan is home to some of the best fashion labels, if you are looking for exclusive outfits then be to sure make appointments with the designers in advance as they can be booked up. Elan is a famous fashion label and dressed Princess Kate when she visited Pakistan in October 2019.

Pakistan also boasts great home interiors from wood, carpets & ceramics. You can visit boutiques but you can find the best deals by going to the source of where they are made and can often commission bespoke pieces to be made for you. Tali is a great local brand based in Karachi which works with local artisans to create limited edition unique pieces.

Language & Culture

The national language of Pakistan is Urdu, with English being the 2nd official language, however there are 77 languages spoken across Pakistan. 49% of the population in Pakistan speak English so getting around is fairly easy. There are provincial languages, which are spoken by many as a third language. In KPK it is Pashto & Hindco, in Punjab it is Punjabi, in Sindh it is Sindhi, in Balochistan it is Balochi and in Gilgit Baltistan it is Shina.

The letters of Urdu are similar to Arabic, most of the signs in the country are written in Urdu and English. Urdu is a fusion of Persian, Arabic & Turkish. It shares its origins from Hindi and is considered its sister language as the two share grammar rules.

Pakistan was founded on the premise of Islam and so the majority of its inhabitants practise the faith of Islam at 96.5%, 2.2% of the inhabitants are hindu’s followed by 1.3% Christians and 0.1% Ahmadi muslims.

Many of the practises such as praying 5 times a day, the observation of the month of ramadan, segregated seating in the villages and celebrations are based on Islamic teachings, however due to the duration of Hindi’s and muslims living together pre-partition some hindu traditions have crept through such as dowries, sangeets at weddings.

Pakistani’s overall are very hospitable people, welcoming everyone to their homes, they believe that each guest brings their own rizq (sustenance), you will find that no matter how little they may have, you will always be invited into their homes.

Useful Phrases

Peace be with you (greeting) - Assalam alay kum

Good bye - Khuda Hafiz / Allah Hafiz

Thank you - Shukriya

How are you? - Aap Kaise Hain? (The n is silent and has a nasal sound)

How much is this? - Yeh Kitna ka Hai

Please - Barai Mehrbani

I don’t speak Urdu - Main Urdu nahin Bol sakta hoon

I like this - Mujhe Pasand Hai

I don’t like this - Mujhe nahin pasand hai

Yes - Ji

No - Nahin

Weather in Pakistan

The weather in Pakistan varies throughout the year depending on where in Pakistan you are. In the North (Giglit Baltistan & Azad Kashmir) you can expect extremely cold weather with snow in the mountains between November and March & more pleasant weather between April & October reaching to high 20s centigrade in the summers.

The province of KPK and Punjab tends to enjoy the 4 seasons autumn, winter, summer and spring. In the winters, although there is no snow, temperatures can feel very cold as the homes do not have central heating and many have marble or hard flooring.

The South tends to be hot all year around, the best times to travel these regions tends to be November to February as outside of these months, it can be very uncomfortable and sticky.

The provided link gives you live weather updates for the different cities in Pakistan.

<https://www.accuweather.com/en/pk/pakistan-weather>

## Useful Information

Local Currency -

The local currency used is Pakistani Rupees, these days £1 equates to Rs367. It is always better to exchange money in Pakistan as you get a better rate. Do this outside of the airports. Most large department stores and eateries also accept credit cards but for local bazaars & street food vendors you would need cash.

Power

Pakistan operates on a 230v supply voltage. . You can use your electric appliances in Pakistan, because the standard voltage (230 V) is the same as in the United Kingdom. So there is no need for a voltage converter in Pakistan. You will need a travel adapter as the plugs used in Pakistan are different to those used in the UK. They use the same plugs as those used in Europe.

Telecommunications

The biggest network providers for telecommunications are Jazz, Telenor, Ufone & Zong. When you arrive in Pakistan it is quite easy to pick up a local sim at the airport. In the main there is 3G & 4G in Pakistan 5G is expected to launch some time in 2023. Local SIM cards can be used on most unlocked phones from Europe, Asia and Australia.

Timezone

Pakistan in the winter is +5 GMT & +4 GMT in the summers

Wifi

Wifi can be found in most developed cities in the hotels, malls, restaurants etc. but it is harder to find in more remote areas in the mountains in the North or the suburban areas in the South. If you want remote access to Wifi it is worth getting a SIM with 4G but in the North the higher you get, connection can be intermittent.

Tipping

Tipping in Pakistan is a natural part of daily life. Anyone who provides you with a service such as waiters, drivers, guards, porters and so on are likely to expect a tip. Restaurants will most probably already have a service charge added, but if not, it is good to tip with 10%. Housekeeping, taxi drivers and such can be tipped around £2.50 (Rs.1000), your tour guide £5 (Rs.2000) per day of your tour and so on.

Dress Attire

In the main women can wear western clothes but it should be modest. So dresses or skirts that are below the knees, necklines should be modest avoid anything which shows your cleavage. You can wear short or 3/4 sleeves avoid sleeveless and anything that’s figure hugging. You don’t need to wear a headscarf unless you are visiting mosques

Men should avoid wearing short shorts, anything at knee level or below is fine. Tops must be worn at all times.

Alcohol

Pakistan is a dry country so you cannot find alcohol sold openly. It is available in some hotels, however there is a great array of local juices & lassi’s (yoghurt based drinks) one can enjoy.

Author

Saadia Baber is the CEO & Founder of Xperience Pakistan, a company established in 2018, to showcase the best of what Pakistan has to offer via experience based holidays in Pakistan created from her knowledge & connections she has in Pakistan to create a truly authentic adventures which enables you to see the traditional & opulent lifestyles which exist in Pakistan. Xperience Pakistan offers a great breadth of experiences from Food, Golfing, cricket, shopping, photography to back to nature tours. Having spent her college years in Pakistan & with lots of family in the country, she has a great black book to create bespoke & customised experiences which also extend to destination proposals & weddings. Her goal is to put Pakistan on peoples radar and show you Pakistan through her eyes.

Check out her latest blog on the top 5 resorts in Gilgit Baltistan to stay at.

https://xperiencepakistan.com/blog-posts/f/5-magical-resorts-to-stay-at-in-gilgit-baltistan---saadia-baber