

# Balochistan



The southwestern province of Balochistan is a hard place to make a living in – or travel through. It's a place of contradictions, at once Pakistan's largest and most sparsely inhabited region, rich in natural resources but with an economically marginalised population. Mostly stony desert and sharp mountains, its importance lies in its strategic location, sitting astride the trade routes (both ancient and modern) to Iran, Afghanistan and the Arabian Sea.

Balochistan's capital is Quetta, a low-slung city with a dusty frontier ambience. Turbanned and thickly bearded Baloch and Pashtun tribesmen rub shoulders with Afghan refugees in its bazaars, and women dressed in billowing burkas are a common sight. For many visitors, Quetta is all they see of Balochistan, but there are several places worth exploring nearby, from the comparative green of Hazarganji-Chiltan National Park to the cool surrounds of Ziarat hill station, the beloved retreat of Pakistan's founder Jinnah.

Further from Quetta and travel becomes tougher. The long distances and poor infrastructure put off many travellers, so few visitors make it to junction towns like Sibi near the Bolan Pass, famed for its cattle fair, let alone to the truly wild Makran Coast. Security also plays a part in keeping visitor numbers low, however. A low-level insurgency by Baloch nationalists pushes some places out of reach, while trouble from restive southern Afghanistan occasionally spills across the border. Taking trusted safety advice before planning a trip is essential. But for those able to make it here, the hospitality and generosity of the people of this region is a glowing feature of any visit.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Gorge on the spiced roast lamb – and the rough frontier ambience – of **Quetta** (p142), the regional capital
- Traverse the **Bolan Pass** (p153) through the mountains, the old nomad's route to Central Asia
- Chill out amid the greenery and views at **Ziarat** (p151), Jinnah's hill station retreat
- Get lost amid the camel races and cultural performances at **Sibi Mela** (see the boxed text, p152), Balochistan's biggest festival



■ POPULATION: 8,000,000

■ AREA: 347,190 SQ KM

## History

Balochistan's unforbearing landscape and fiercely independent peoples have made it perilous to invade and – until the discovery of natural gas – unrewarding to rule. Even today, the writ of the government is light at best, and its inhabitants regard themselves as among the toughest and bravest people on earth. These factors collide to make Balochistan one of contemporary Pakistan's prime political flashpoints.

Evidence from Mehrgarh – the oldest known archaeological site on the subcontinent – and elsewhere indicates that Balochistan was inhabited as early as the Stone Age and was part of an ancient line of communication between the Indus Valley and Persia, and then Mesopotamia.

Cyrus the Great conquered the inhospitable coastal belt known as the Makran in the 6th century BC. The Persians subsequently went on to rule all of Balochistan until Alexander

the Great tore through in 330 BC, although even that great figure ran into trouble here, beaten by the desert rather than the locals.

In subsequent times the region encountered numerous power shifts that included the Kushans, Arabs, Mongols, Persians and Mughals. A unity of sorts coalesced around the Khans of Kalat in the 15th century, which prevailed until the British arrived in the mid-1800s.

Following a disastrous war in Afghanistan in the 1840s, the British moved on Balochistan to protect their back door to India, but didn't formally declare the region British territory until 1887. Following this, Balochistan was established as an agency under the direct responsibility of the governor general of India, and was ruled with the lightest of touches. Balochi feudal chiefs retained considerable control over the administration of tribal justice, collection of revenue and levying of tribal armies, while

### TRAVELLING SAFELY IN BALOCHISTAN

Government restrictions mean that many parts of Balochistan are either completely off limits to foreigners or only accessible with a permit. While Quetta remains *generally* safe (see p145), the ongoing Baloch insurgency, spill over from unstable southern Afghanistan and general tribal tensions all combine to put swathes of the province out of reach of travellers.

The safety situation can change in the blink of an eye, with places that once required permits no longer needing them and areas that were once considered safe now deemed risky. If you're contemplating travelling beyond Quetta, you're *strongly* advised to first check the latest safety situation with the **Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation** (PTDC; ☎ 081-825826; Azad Muslim Hotel, Jinnah Rd, Quetta; 🕒 9am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Sat, to 6.30pm in summer). We'd also recommend keeping an eye on the *Balochistan Times* and *Frontier Post* newspapers to keep abreast of the current security climate.

Security concerns may require government-issued permits to visit certain parts of Balochistan. Known as No Objection Certificates (NOCs), these are issued by the **Home & Tribal Affairs Office** (☎ 081-9201036; Balochistan Secretariat, Ground fl, New Block; 🕒 8.30am-2pm Mon-Thu & Sat, 8.30am-noon Fri) in Quetta. NOCs are only issued if the area you would like to visit has a current 'low-risk' climate. The permits are usually required by local authorities because they can't guarantee the safety of travellers in these particular regions and don't want to be solely accountable if things go wrong. Permits should be applied for at least a few days in advance of your trip. There's no charge, but take along photocopies of your passport and Pakistan visa. In certain circumstances, an armed guard from the Balochistan levies (rural police) may be insisted upon – he'll expect tipping.

At the time of research, Quetta and its immediate environs (including Ziarat, Hanna Lake and Urak Valley) were safe for travellers, as was travel on the road southwest to Taftan (on the Iran border). Advice for road travel east to Punjab's Dera Ghazi Khan (DG Khan) and Lahore changes regularly, while the road to Dera Ismail Khan in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) was regarded as dangerous to foreigners as it passes through volatile Waziristan. However, these 'safe' regions could change in the future, so *always* double-check with the PTDC. It's often necessary to get official permission if you intend venturing off the main highways or into the interior. Self-drivers should stick to the main highways and avoid travelling after dark. The main train lines are all considered safe.