

Azad Jammu & Kashmir



Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJ&K) – *azad* means ‘free’ – is pre-Partition Kashmir’s western third, administered by Pakistan under the terms of the 1949 UN ceasefire. Jammu, the southern end of the Jammu & Kashmir state that Britain assembled from former Sikh territories in 1846, is mostly on the Indian-held side. Most Pakistanis feel the Indians wrongly and unfairly took possession of the majority of the territory at Partition and that it has been occupied illegally ever since. This all-consuming and divisive issue remains the dominant feature of Pakistan-India relations.

Beautiful and tragic, AJ&K’s best feature is its natural splendour, exemplified by the forested valleys of the Lesser Himalaya and the Pir Panjal Range, which forms the southwest rim of the Vale of Kashmir. But beneath the beauty lie the destructive mountain-building forces that have recently brought so much misfortune to this already troubled region.

Pakistan’s 16km security zone along the Line of Control puts the most scenic parts of AJ&K – the Neelum Valley, the upper Jhelum Valley above Muzaffarabad, plus mountainous areas to the south – off limits to would-be travellers. How easy it is to visit the remaining regions – Muzaffarabad and the Nanga Parbat region, and the nonborder districts of Bagh, Poonch, Kotli and Mirpur – depends on the current military climate along the Line of Control, the whim of bureaucracy, whom you ask, and perhaps even what road you take to get there.

TRAVELLING IN AZAD JAMMU & KASHMIR

At the time of research, road border checkpoints were asking foreigners to produce a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the Ministry for Kashmir Affairs & Northern Areas in Islamabad.

To obtain a NOC, the easiest thing to do is to get a Pakistan-based travel agent to organise your ‘tour’ and NOC. Independently, you will need to provide a letter explaining the areas you wish to visit and the dates of the visits, together with two photocopies of your passport data pages and visa, to the **Ministry of Kashmir Affairs & Northern Areas** (☎ 051-9206580; Block S/R Secretariat, Islamabad). You may also be asked to provide an additional letter from your embassy or high commission in Islamabad reaffirming that you are indeed the person stated in your passport (your embassy may charge a fee for this service) and forward this to the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (☎ 051-9207917; Constitution Ave G-5/1, Islamabad). Apply as far in advance as possible as it’s a long and convoluted procedure and at the end they may just say no.

The entry and permit situation is constantly subject to change; for the latest information check with the Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC) in any major Pakistani city, and Muzaffarabad’s **AJ&K Tourism** (☎ 058810-34623; fax 32625; Bank Sq, Chattrar).

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