

# Karakoram Highway



A thin ribbon of asphalt strikes north from near Islamabad and leaves the modern capital and the dusty Punjab plains far behind. As it weaves through sparse green hills, the first wrinkles of mountain-building in this geological 'collision zone', this unassuming road gives little hint as to what lies ahead. This is the high road to China, the Karakoram Highway (KKH), which was blasted and bulldozed through an intractable landscape of raging rivers, deep ravines and precipitous peaks in the 1960s and '70s. It is a 1200km marvel of engineering and a symbolic collaboration between Pakistan and China. It is also a magnet for adventure-seekers.

The KKH unites the plains of Pakistan with erstwhile independent mountain kingdoms and connects South Asia with West and Central Asia. It follows a branch of that ancient network of trade routes known as the Silk Road, and one of its tricks is time travel. The KKH takes you to where Buddhism spread to China and Tibet, to the colourful bazaar of Kashgar that remains more than just a memory of a Silk Road oasis, and to the intrigues of the 19th-century Great Game. It has also brought the 21st century to the fabled valley of Hunza, and fume-belching trucks and minibuses have now mostly displaced donkeys and camels as the caravans of trade.

As it traverses northern Pakistan and enters western China, via the 4730m Khunjerab Pass, the KKH navigates the highest concentration of soaring peaks and long glaciers in the world. Intrepid travellers are delivered to some of the most awe-inspiring and challenging trekking they are ever likely to encounter. And for some, this is where the real adventure starts.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Unwinding in **Karimabad** (p299), the heart of the fabled valley of Hunza and home to the 700-year-old mountain-top **Baltit Fort** (p300)
- Testing your courage and sense of balance on the Two Bridges walk near the peaceful village of **Passu** (p311)
- Marvelling at the mallet-wielding mayhem and horsemanship at a polo tournament in **Gilgit** (p275)
- Bartering in the colourful bazaars of **Kashgar** (p324), former Silk Road oasis and legendary market town
- Exploring the trails of **Baltistan** (p284) and beyond, where the Karakoram ruptures from the earth's crust in an unequalled display of high peaks and twisting glaciers
- Crossing the **Khunjerab Pass** (p317), a geographical and cultural watershed, in a modern replay of an ancient passage between empires past



