BY ERIC ELLIS

A short walk with Eric Newby

Warriors with scimitars and muskets have given way to warlords with AK-47s and mobile phones, but there are still hidden valleys of timeless peace and beauty.

SHANGRI-LA LAND
The Hunza valley in autumn is glorious ... and being Ismaili, the religious air is not heavy

There was not a house or village anywhere, only a whitewashed tomb set on a hill. And far up the river bed, picking their way across the grey shingle, a file of men and donkeys. Here for me was the beginning of Central Asia.

– Eric Newby,
A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush, 1958.

I FIRST READ ERIC NEWBY'S MASTERPIECE when I was 18. It didn't quite change my life, but it enlivened three otherwise dreary lunchtimes – I so wanted to range high, like Newby, into Central Asia's soaring peaks, where there were no houses or villages anywhere, to Kafiristan, Land of the Unbelievers, to meet Panjshiris and Chitralis, or whatever they were in this region where Tamerlane and Genghis Khan and Alexander the Great and colonial players of the Great Game trekked, plotted and conquered.

I wanted to explore massifs and high meadows, traverse glaciers and slide across moraines of slate, to plunge into ravines in pursuit of Shangri-La. As summits ascended magnificently, I would swap intrigues with swarthy warlords in chapans, with robed and pious mullahs, well-thumbed Korans at hand. With campfire naan, I would rip succulent chunks from lambs slaughtered and spit-roasted in my honour at the nod of a powerful nabob, my friend. After a bracing chukka of polo, I wanted to cleverly remark of this noble diversion of gentlemen, preferably in an obscure Persian dialect, one of 10 tongues I knew, that "Other People Play At Other Things – The King of Games Is Still the Game of Kings".

I would swashbuckle with Wilfred Thesiger, the great colonial explorer, as did Newby when he chanced upon the legendary Brit on a rocky crag – actually, I wanted to be Wilfred Thesiger. I wanted to quip, as had the disgusted Wilf when he saw Newby and companion inflating airbeds, "God, you must be a couple of pansies," the memorable last line in *Short Walk*.

Newby's scribblings made me ache to go there, wherever "there" was, a tall order for a clerk in a Geelong department store earning $69 a week and it was at the start of a 10-year Soviet occupation of the region.

Almost 30 years after I swooned over Newby, my friend Hans Hoefer proposed we take our own short walk in the Hindu Kush. A German photographer who first visited the region about when I'd found Newby, Hans had done the overland trail from Europe, ending in Singapore, where he still lives.

What would Thesiger and Newby have made of Hoefer's party of 11, of friends and their kids, 50 years after their epic journey, all of us cloaked in expatriate privilege, comfortable citizens of everywhere but of nowhere. The spartan Thesiger was no great admirer of America, remarking that "the long-term effect of US culture as it spreads to every nook and cranny in every desert and every mountain valley will be the end of mankind". We were travelling in places often made dangerous to outsiders by American bumbling, and what would Wilf have made of the kids' adopted American accents and inclinations or our must-have accoutrements – the iPods, laptops, portable DVD players, my obsession with hot water, Yvan's with clean sheets, Shazhad's with good wine in a dry country, once his own? Water would be plentiful, cascading down glaciers in mighty torrents from 13 of the world's 25 highest peaks. But very little of it would be hot, power (for computers or cleanliness) not being a priority for Pakistan's military regime or its innkeepers. Should we actually meet a mullah, he might want to take us hostage, behead us and videotape it ... or so the West's panicky travel advisories suggest.

Would Thesiger and Newby have even cared about Washington's War on Terror, or that Osama bin Laden plotted Armageddon from the same caves in these mountains where London Tube bombers might learn their evil? Should we even attempt our trip?

The road wriggled on. It was like driving along the back of a boa-constrictor that had just enjoyed a good meal, and equally bumpy.

We strike out in the last fortnight of Ramadan, leaving the Raj-era garrison town of Rawalpindi, 11 in a mini-bus, luggage and bicycles on the roof. Akhtar, our personable driver, is keen to get this trip into the mountains done and be back home to family for Eid ul-Fitr, the end of Ramadan.

A few minutes from 'Pindi, we turn onto the Grand Trunk Road, passing a truck of officers with impressive chests of medals, and in pugrees, the ceremonial head-dress that reminds us that Pakistan is no liberal democracy. Hans and Yvan vigorously debate another recent coup in Thailand; Shazhad chats in his native Urdu with Akhtar; two wives disappear into guidebooks, the kids consumed with iPods and Hilary Duff. We're travelling one of the world's most remarkable thoroughfares. The "GT Road," as a billion South Asians know it, stretches almost 3000km and is one of the few roads that traverses several countries with the same name. Potholed and clogged with all manner of mobility – four wheels or four legs – the GT Road (never GTR) has been so named for centuries, from its eastern terminus in Bangladesh at the ancient Bengal capital, Sonargaon, west across northern India through its great cities – Calcutta, Varanasi, Delhi, Amristar – to Lahore, 'Pindi and the wild Pakistani frontier city of Peshawar. In Mughal and British imperial times, travellers could go on through the Khyber Pass to Kabul. They still can, but after decades of Afghan war and banditry, they'd be lucky to get past the first switchback.

The GT Road is as chaotic today as it doubtless was in the 1700s. Pakistanis lament that their highway system accounts for just 4% of the road network but carries 80% of the traffic. In the late 1990s, the World Bank funded a gleaming tollway from Lahore to Peshawar alongside the GT Road to cut a 20-hour journey to six. The Lahore-Pindi leg is fine but somewhere outside Islamabad, will, money and government ran out, as often happens in Pakistan. A few kilometres after Taxila, a UN heritage site for its Ghandaran Buddhist antiquities, we turn north onto another remarkable road, the Karakoram Highway (the KKH), that winds 1000km to the Chinese border.

The KKH's lower reaches are blanketed with tent cities from last year's earthquake. The road winds endlessly on, ever steeper through miserably poor Sunni villages. Gazing out the window, six-year-old Delphine remarks to Dorine: "Mummy, there are no ladies in this country."

I took one last look at the smiling plain behind us with its rich market gardens and the mountains to the west where the sun was beginning to sink, then we were in the cold shadow of the gorge with the river thundering

HANS HOEFER

around us, cold and green and white, sucking and tugging at great boulders.

This trip along the KKH to the Khunjerab Pass, at 4733m the world's highest road, is a homecoming for Hans and Yvan. Thirty years ago, they launched the famous *Insight Guides*, high-end travel books which were to the backpacker's bible *Lonely Planet* what Champagne is to Cold Duck. Their adventures and writings took them across the Hindu Kush, to old Kabul and Kandahar, to Nepal and Bali and beyond, describing the exotic hot-spots of the day before the group-travel set, civil war and Schappelle Corby's dozy mates sullied them.

In 1986, Hans and Cynthia sojourned in the storied Hunza Valley, long thought to have inspired James Hilton's mythical Shangri-La in his 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. They "adopted" a bright young Ismaili, Ejaz ullah Baig, whose father and fathers before him had, since the ninth century, been viziers to one of the world's oldest courts, the princely state of Hunza. The Hoefers helped put Ejaz through school. Today, with a political science degree, he's the curator of the 700-year-old Baltit Fort, the Mir's ancestral home that's been restored by the Aga Khan, Hunza's spiritual leader. Ejaz and the Hoefers meet for the first time since Ejaz – now 36 and with a family of his own – became a man.

This evening was like some golden age of human happiness, attained sometimes by children, more rarely by grown-ups, and it communicated its magic in some degree to all of us.

The Hunza Valley in autumn is glorious and it's easy to linger for a week. Being Ismaili, the religious air is not as heavy. We take many short walks and one day cycle down from Khunjerab snowline almost to Sost, where Chinese trucks unload their goods for shipping to Pakistan's bazaars.

Our Hunza days are clear, the nights chilly, the food fresh and plentiful. Little wonder that many Hunzakut, as the locals are known, live well into their 90s.

We leave reluctantly, intending to fly to Islamabad. But Pakistan Airlines isn't running flights during the Eid celebrations, which may be just as well. The military recently took over the hour-long flight to Gilgit because PIA couldn't keep its planes in the air. Akhtar gets us back to 'Pindi in time for the first Shawwal moon. Shahzad, Dorine and their three get back on the GT Road to visit family in Lahore. Hans, Cynthia and their two return to Singapore to plan their next trip while Yvan, now a cricket devotee, returns to Bangkok. I continue three hours west to Peshawar, the wild capital of the wilder North-West Frontier Province, where I have arranged a promising lunch with the legendary American historian and anthropologist Nancy Dupree.

Going very strong at 78, Nancy has lived and worked between Kabul and Peshawar for nearly 50 years. She shuttles the hour's flight between the two cities above the Khyber Pass every few weeks and there is no one of note in this wild region she doesn't know or hasn't met; even a young "and very shy" Osama bin Laden once knocked on her door. Back then he was like all who seek her out, in search of her wisdom. Dupree arrived in Kabul in 1962, the wife of an American diplomat. Soon after she scandalised the social scene by leaving him for the charismatic archaeologist Louis Dupree, then regarded as the world's pre-eminent chronicler of Afghanistan culture and history. So began a sweeping love affair she says "I'm still having", even though Louis died in 1989, breaking a heart that's still wounded.

> "The red daubs warn of an uncleared minefield, as do the maimed and legless men and children in the roadside bazaars. With Newby it was never thus"

The Dupree legacy is the 40,000 books and papers they amassed covering Afghanistan's history that she hopes will eventually be housed in a new "Afghan Centre" at the war-trashed Kabul University. That is, if she can find the money – she needs $US3m to finish the centre and get her life's work online. In any event, it won't happen until Afghanistan's ever-feuding clans find that even tenuous peace that has eluded them for 40 years. "I've seen the things people do to each other here," this still wonderfully young woman says gravely. "Even after all this fuss of the last few years, I'm not at all convinced it's gonna make it."

The following morning we arrived at Kabul and drove down the great ceremonial avenues, newly asphalted, past Russian steamrollers still ironing the final bumps to the principal hotel.

At Kabul Friday 50 years later, and its not Eric Newby arriving but around 300 South Korean Christian missionaries, for a "festival of peace" Afghanistan didn't know it was hosting. Immaculate in white T-shirts, jeans, Nikes and neat haircuts, the tidy flock arrive, singing hymns and clutching Bibles as they march across the tarmac, an irresistible force meeting the immovable object of three Afghan border guards. In the arrival hall and with no common language, there's a stand-off as three of the flock step forward to negotiate entry with a steadfast officer, a hapless Korean diplomat translating.

TIME TRAVELLERS
Cloaked in expatriate privilege and loaded with must-have accoutrements, tourists pose on the historic Karakoram Highway, above left; a local driver in his colourfully appointed chariot

The guard makes it clear there is no way he is letting any of these people into his Islamic Republic, whether they have visas or not (they didn't). The negotiations go nowhere for an hour until the ever-smiling Koreans decide the peace festival should begin right there in the arrival hall. Butcher's paper and crayons are produced. The flock plonk themselves down in the dust and start drawing. Five minutes later, scores of posters saying, in English "I Love Afghanistan". They've elected to love their way into Afghanistan. One man hands out safety pins and the congregation starts pinning a poster to anyone within reach. They descend on a posse of Taliban-like beards in robes, who yelp and hotfoot in horror. Now, it's the turn of a posse of whities; South African, Ukrainian and Canadian hard-men mercenaries working for the many so-called "private military companies" operating in Afghanistan, heavily armed and heavily paid contract militias to whom the war on terror has been outsourced. They're waiting for a plane and sucking on a slab of Heinekens while they do. Two Koreans bible-bashers approach them, safety pins and impromptu art to the fore. The hardmen snarl "fuck off". And the Koreans do, back to Seoul on the next flight

I had never seen such a mountain ... it seemed to be made from a sort of shattered granite; demoralised was the word that rose continually to my lips.

Looking east-west and viewed cross-sectionally, this region resembles a massive triangle. The Pashtun plains of Pakistan and Afghanistan flatten to the south, the Tajik and Chinese steppes extend northwards. In Afghanistan, the triangle's snowy point is the famous Salang Pass at 3400m. The Soviets somehow hewed a road tunnel through granite and slate, the 3km tunnel took nine years to build but allowed year-round access between south and north when it opened in 1964 – north, that is, to what was then the Soviet Union. Red Army columns poured through from 1979 until 1982 when the Afghan mujahadeen resistance ambushed a military convoy inside the passage and some 2000 people were killed.

Meandering through the towering gorges, the traveller is suddenly transported into one of those sepia-toned newsreels once smuggled to western newsrooms by triumphant muj after the ambush of a Soviet column. Some 25 years on, the detritus of battle remains; burnt-out tanks, helicopter blades and signs in Cyrillic rusting in the slush. And other more sinister reminders; just a few metres on either side of the road are stones coated with red paint, forming a perimeter for perhaps 100km from one side of the pass to the other. The red daubs warn that this is an uncleared minefield, as do the maimed and legless men and children vending dried fruits in roadside bazaars. With Newby, it was never thus.

Distinguished visitors began to arrive ... a vigorous looking old man whose beard was dyed with henna and another like the man with the skullcap we had met in the valley with the hard face of a professional killer.

In Kunduz I meet my warlord. I embrace Mohamed Daoud Khan as strangers do in Afghanistan when introduced by friends and "brothers", with kisses to each cheek, his monstrous hands devouring mine as he draws me to his huge chapan-clad frame. His lair, a barracks for 100 of his men, is cosy this freezing night. We nibble almonds and sultanas. There are carpets and chairs arranged in a square, comfortable but hardly as lavish as popular literature would have us imagine. Khan, a military man, is a legend in Afghanistan. Kunduz was the last major northern town held by the Taliban before it fell to the Northern Alliance in November 2001. Daoud led the campaign and is now a minister in Hamid Karzai's government. He fiddles with his mobile phone, and is taken by mine. "Can that receive email?" he asks in Tajik, a Persian derivative. I sleep at his guest house and next day am taken high into the mountains by 4WD to the site where the Taliban fell and where, after a short walk in the Hindu Kush, there's a freshly slaughtered lamb on a spit roasting over a campfire. After 30 years, I've arrived in the "there" of my imagination. ●

Eric Newby died, aged 86, in Surrey on October 20, as Eric Ellis, Hans Hoefer and Yvan Van Outrive were cycling down the Karakoram Highway, along the slopes of Rakaposhi.