

An Escape to Takht-e-Bahi (Mardan)

By Shaikh Muhammed Ali

“Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts (and minds) may thus learn wisdom and their ears may thus learn to hear?” - Juz 17, Sura Hajj (XXII), Verse 46, Quran.

I have been trying to find the reason I am so fond of traveling since I was a child. The first answer I found when I was around seven years of age and happened to read my horoscope—a science which I hardly understood at that tender age—and discovered to my astonishment that I was a Capricorn. Yes, a mountain goat which rises to splendid heights up in the mountains.

Another reason I found recently around 4:30 in the morning, when I happened to read the above verse in the Quran. It somehow captures my thirst for traveling and knowledge: the ‘wandering dervish’ I have come to be known as by my friends. I realized that my heart pumps with fresh blood during each newer and crazier escapade down un-beaten tracks to remote locations within the land of the pure: Pakistan.



(On the Grand Trunk Road headed for Nowshera)

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Ishfaq Anwar, a much younger former colleague, once said that since I really was crazy about visiting the ruins in this country, I must visit Takht-e-Bahi, one of the oldest Gandhara period sites in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). This notion somehow got stuck in my eccentric mind, and a visit to Takht-e-Bahi ruins had been on my travel list for some years, but with the political, ethnic, and religious upheaval in NWFP in general and the close proximity of this district in particular to Malakand Division where Taliban abound, I put it off. As it now seems that the Taliban are here to stay and the situation is not getting any better, I decided to take the long awaited journey. Of course, I could not have travelled without my family and so I had to be more cautious this time around.



(Detour off Nowshera toward Mardan)

The pilgrimage

The first Saturday of the month came as it usually does. It was a holiday, Saturday being lately declared a non-working day by the government of Pakistan, so we packed our bags with “hit the road Jack” written all over our faces. We took the Grand Trunk Road north from Islamabad, passing through Taxila, Hassan Abdal, Attock City, Attock Khurd, Khairabad, and finally taking the detour off Nowshera through Mardan to reach Takht-e-Bahi, a cool 163 kilometers from our house in Islamabad.



(Twelve more kilometers to go)

By the time we reached Mardan, we were almost starving and thus stopped at a famous roadside hotel the Mardan Restaurant serving the local Mardan Nan (Bread) and their famous Chapli Kebabs. Although children were searching for the likes of McDonalds or Pizza Hut, we had to make do with what was available. The food was sumptuous indeed, later topped with the local Qahva (Green tea) to wash all the meat (did I forget to mention the lamb?). Before we ate ourselves to intoxication, we decided to hit the road again and reached our actual destination, Takht-e-Bahi.



(Almost there)

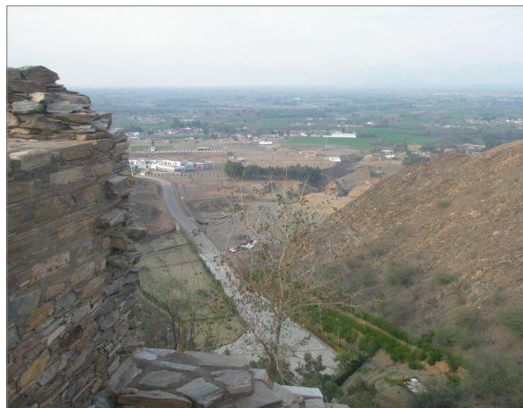
We reached the Takht-e-Bahi ruins around 4:00 p.m. and simply started climbing the mountain, the views growing ever more awe-inspiring as we rose to higher

altitudes. What one can find in the Taxila museum is in no way close to what we saw on top of these hills. We were actually walking through, breathing in and visualizing history when we visited the huge stupas, amazing chapels, monk's quarters, study chambers, meditation rooms, refectory etc. The views across the plain, south-west to Peshawar and north to Swat, were an added bonus.



(The history of Takht-e-Bahi at the entrance of the ruins)

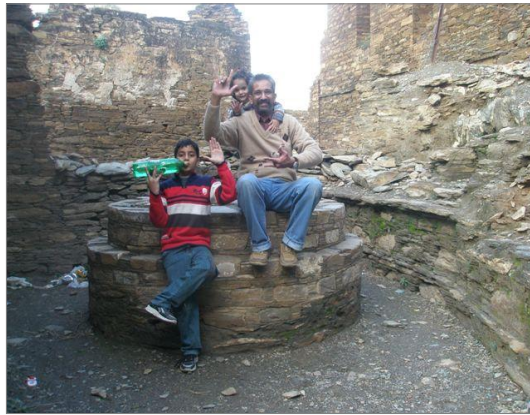
After spending almost two hours in the mountains thoroughly appreciating the peace and serenity of this wonderful heavenly abode, we decided to descend before the Maghreb prayers. I hasten to add that Mardan is rather safe and, as of this writing, there was no news of the Taliban or any other force taking over this beautiful mountain town.



(A beautiful view from the top)

A little bit of History

Mardan, 60km north-east of Peshawar, is famous as the birth place of the ‘Guides’, the Queen’s Own Guide Corps, an elite British regiment of North West Frontier soldier-spies founded in the 1840s. The local people here are predominantly Yusufzai Pashtuns. The town itself has little to offer but it’s a base for seeing a concentration of Buddhist and other ancient sites of Gandhara. ¹



(Modern day Stupas, the author with Adil and Ayesha)

Takht-e-Bahi, by far the best and most complete of all Gandhara’s ruins are of this 1st to 7th century AD Buddhist monastery, spectacularly placed on the rocky hill 15 km north-west of Mardan. It was excavated from 1907 to 1913 and later reconstructed. ²

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Getting there & away

Takht-e-Bahi is approximately a one hour drive from Peshawar (N5 east to N45 north), three hours from Mingora (N95 south to N45 south), Dir (N45 south), Rawalpindi or Islamabad (N5 west to N45 north).



(A beautiful view of the passage way where Buddhist monks once strolled)

References

1. The lonely planet, Pakistan, John King, Bradley Mayhew, David St. Vincent, 5th edition, July 1998.
2. *ibid.*