



Northern Pakistan is no Switzerland

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I have had the privilege of living in an eclectic mix of cities over the years; Geneva, Istanbul, Dhaka, and London to name a few. Due to my fond memories of my time in Switzerland, comparisons of Northern Pakistan to Switzerland have always piqued my curiosity. I used to often ask myself, 'Is Northern Pakistan really Switzerland-esque?' On my recent trip to Kumrat Valley, I found the answer to this question. Northern Pakistan is no Switzerland. There is an extreme dearth of airports in the region. The closest international airport is in Islamabad. A road trip from Islamabad to Kumrat Valley is an agonising 14-hour journey. And it takes this long when everything goes according to plan, which often does not. Traffic jams caused by landslides, vehicles breaking down due to being driven on unforgiving, unpaved roads and the general shortage and unavailability of fuel can increase travel times severalfold. The shorter route, taking a flight from Islamabad to Chitral, the closest domestic airport to Kumrat Valley, still involves a 7-hour road trip under perfect conditions. On the other hand, a cross-country drive from Geneva Airport to Chamonix-Mont-Blanc, located in the French Alps and bordering both Italy and Switzerland, takes a mere 70 minutes.

Never mind the lack of provision of alcohol for foreigners (although a major pull for places such as Turkey and Dubai), the region lacks the necessities required for tourism to thrive. In Kumrat Valley, there are no high-quality hotels. In winter, unlike Chamonix-Mont-Blanc, much of the region shuts down rather than doubling down as a skiing resort. Instead of cable cars making the area accessible, tourists are forced to rely on visibly overworked and overburdened horses and donkeys to commute, perpetuating the cycle of animal abuse. Moreover, tour guides and travel agencies are often deceptive in terms of over-promising and underdelivering to their clients. Shockingly, at times, these 'experts' have never been to the region and are navigating the space for the very first time themselves, much like their clients. Although one might view the aforementioned services as luxuries, rest assured, the region does not offer access to basic necessities such as waste collection or sanitation facilities either. In my 4-day trip, I did not come across any clinics or hospitals, yet I was approached by numerous individuals raising funds for mosques and madrasas. Being an

economist at heart (and by profession), one cannot help but ponder what mosques contribute to the development of the region and where our priorities lie as a nation. Currently, no development-related index incorporates churches, mosques, or temples, as an indicator of development. Used here as a proxy, the Human Development Index, developed by Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq, measures development in terms of life expectancy at birth, mean and expected years of schooling and gross national income per capita. Although madrasas are technically educational institutions, for context, Pakistan's Single National Curriculum does not touch on interest/mark-up in mathematics, sex education in general studies and only briefly brushes over the theory of evolution as well as human sexual reproduction, without providing illustrations. By doing so, our education system will produce individuals who are ill-equipped to function in the real world and are resultantly, at risk of getting left behind. If the residents of Northern Pakistan do not realise what schools and hospitals contribute to human development, ironically due to a lack of education, Government intervention is needed to improve the standard of living of the region. This, in turn, will make the region feel more welcoming to tourists.

Then there is the aspect of safety and security. During my trip, I did not come across any teenage or adult women in public. Later, I realised why this was the case. Despite being accompanied by a group of 7 men, the 3 women in our group were constantly harassed. Locals would often express their disapproval at their sheer existence by shouting 'Astaghfirullah' from near and afar. This issue of safety is made worse by a lack of police presence in the area, combined with a lack of internet and cellular reception to call for help, individuals roaming freely in the streets with guns and people openly injecting themselves with drugs at public campsites. In these circumstances, a lack of social distancing and defiance of COVID-19 related SOPs becomes the least of your concerns. Northern Pakistan is years behind Switzerland in terms of services being provided to tourists in the region. However, it is perhaps decades behind Switzerland in terms of how unsafe and unwelcoming it makes its tourists, in particular, women, feel.



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