

Pakistan: a priceless trip

The winning schools from the 'Experience Pakistan' competition visit the country on a whirlwind ten-day tour visiting schools, cities, ancient sites and even meeting the President. Laura McNeill reports

“On arrival at Islamabad airport, it soon becomes obvious this is going to be far more than the average school trip. In fact being treated like royalty is no understatement as we are ushered off the plane into the VIP lounge and given tea while our bags are taken through customs.

Our coach arrives and we weave through the crowded streets of Rawalpindi - a bustling chaos of cars, bikes and garish painted lorries accompanied discretely by an armed guard on both coaches. The hotel we are heading for is the five star Islamabad Marriott - built in the 1960s. Islamabad is a modern city built on a grid system - capital city of Pakistan and home of the government. Islamabad is so unlike most Asian cities that, in the words of Sir Christopher Macrae, ex British ambassador to Pakistan in the 1990s “Islamabad is 25 miles from Pakistan”.

The six schools had won a competition to put together a 15 minute multimedia presentation on one aspect of Pakistan's culture or history. Out of the 130 schools that had entered, six schools won, sending four or five 15 year-olds each, plus the teacher with whom they had created the presentation. Also on the party were some British dignitaries with a special interest in the country to provide commentary and Chris Thatcher, previously head of the National Association of Head Teachers, who has been project leader since the competition started in 2001.

Experience Pakistan is funded entirely by Humayan Mughal. Born in Pakistan, he is now a millionaire computer manufacturer and founder of Akhter Computers in the UK. His goal is to encourage mutual understanding between British and Pakistani school children, to break down alienating media stereotypes of Islamic extremists and to provide positive memories of a beautiful country for the children to take back. A highly intelligent, charming and modest man Humayan, was accompanied by his British born wife, Jasmine, and three of his eight children. He explained his motivation:

“I want the children to



Children from the trip on the balcony at the famous Lahore fort

see for themselves what Pakistan is really like - I want them to make up their own minds.”

Our first day starts with a visit to one of the Islamabad Model Colleges for Girls. These are state schools where all the teaching is in English - they have entrance exams much like the old fashioned grammar school system in the UK and charge a minimum fee to attend - about 3,000 rupees (£30) a year. The 2000 pupils are educated here from primary to degree level. The charming and well behaved children - with perfect English - are a delight to talk to. “My favourite subject is computer studies,” says 13 year-old Anum Pervez, who added that she has a business mind and wants to study economics when she is older.

Sue Griffith, the teacher from Jeff Joseph Sale Moor Technology College says: “What I notice about the children at this school is how eager, positive, motivated and obviously bright they are. I wish there was more of that in the the UK - here education is obviously seen as the way out of poverty.”

After a talk from the principal, presentation by each of the British schools and a tour round the classrooms, we go to the Pakistan Senate to meet the chairman. He takes questions on tourism and investment and then we move straight on to meet the country's Prime Minister, Shaukat Aziz, at his palatial residence in the hills overlooking Islamabad.

In front of clicking photographers and under the gorgeous chandeliers, the kids ask him about politics and his background. He talks about the shared heritage of Britain and Pakistan, how illiteracy and lack of proper drinking water present big stumbling blocks in a country with a rapidly expanding birth rate, and talks of his government's commitment to fighting gender inequality and providing decent education for all. Asked about the thorny subject of the disputed territory of Kashmir, the Prime Minister replies: “The root cause of the mistrust between India and Pakistan is the Kashmir problem but we are eager to settle our disputes with India, and at least we are playing cricket again.” He adds with a smile, “and today we played well,” which raises a laugh around the room.



Taxila: an ancient Buddhist monastery

NEW ACADEMIC YEAR - SET Y

At 8am the next morning we head for the valley of Taxila, the birthplace of Buddhism where we visit the Jaulian monastery - a stone square structure full of tiny buddhist 'stupas' and the famous Wishing Buddha. Legend states that wishes made in front of the Wishing Buddha come true, but as most of us wish for good weather for the trip to K2, sadly our luck was out.

Taxila is followed by lunch at the British Embassy in Islamabad. The British Ambassador explains the work of the High Commission. Pakistan has the sixth largest population in the world - 150 million people - and that population is set to increase to 320 million by 2050. Yet it is only 144th on the human development index. Counter-terrorism, counter narcotics and the prevention of forced marriages provide a lot of work for the embassy, one of the biggest British embassies in the world.

Exhausted, we have the next day to luxuriate in the Marriott. Most of the kids swim in the pool and start mingling and laughing - a relief for the hard working teachers.

Although the planned trip to Skardu, under the magnificent peak of K2, can't take place the next morning due to poor weather conditions, the alternative is a delight. We drive 7,000 feet up into the foothills of the Himalayas to the town of Murree. It's a mere hill compared to the mighty mountains of the Himalayas, whose snow capped peaks we can see just glinting through the clouds. Though at twice the height of Snowdon, Murree's Bhurban golf course must be one of the highest golf courses in the world. Wasting no time, the kids were soon playing cricket on the lawn.

We were up again very early the next morning to board the military aircraft to take us to Peshawar. After lunch at the Fort Bala Hissar our coach takes the long winding road to the Khyber Pass, accompanied by a pick-up truck with four armed guards provided by the Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation. Security is tight as Chris Thatcher explains that given the political situation and the media hysteria surrounding Islamic countries, the tiniest incident could be a reason that Experience Pakistan could be cancelled altogether. As we pass out of bustling, crowded Peshawar we pass by the mud encampments where the last of the Afghan refugees still live and the notorious black market that lines the road. We are entering the famous North West territory, fought over for thousands of years by invading armies since Alexander the Great.

The North West Territory is the only place in Pakistan we see women wearing full burkhas. After two hours of steady climbing we arrive at the top of the pass and the view over the ancient valley is breathtaking. We are given lunch at the famous



Lahore: local children follow us as we visit a local school

headquarters of the Khyber Rifles. That night, back in Peshawar, the governor of the North West Province treats us to a five course banquet with a military band. We meet President Mushareff the next day back in Islamabad. President Mushareff, a tall impressive man, has survived several assassination attempts. The children ask him questions about the political situation in Baluchistan, education and Pakistan's reputation as a poor country for tourism. He gives lengthy and warm-hearted answers explaining his vision of 'enlightened moderation' and provides tea and biscuits in a beautiful marquee on the lawn outside.

The President has taken a personal interest in the trip since its start, providing military planes every year to take the children safely between the three cities on the itinerary: Islamabad, Peshawar and Lahore. It's hard to imagine that a British Prime Minister would show so much interest and hospitality to a visiting group of school children from Pakistan. The trip demonstrates how strongly Pakistan is seeking to challenge its poor reputation in the West, certainly the amazing welcome we received from every one we met is testimony to the warmth, kindness and hospitality of the people.

The next day, we are in Lahore for the last two days of the tour. A visit to the Teach A Child project school is very moving - these are some of the poorest children in Lahore - unable to afford school uniforms or books. If these highly motivated kids end up with good jobs and careers they change the fortune of their whole family. This school takes the brightest from the direst circumstances and gives them a good education for free, a chance to escape the poverty trap. Lahore museum contains a wealth of art work spanning thousands of years but the mosque, one of the largest in the world, is a must see.

On the last night the kids put together some hilarious sketches, sending up each other and the teachers. It's been a learning experience for most of them and a chance to make friends - everyone exchanges emails and phone numbers. Several of the teachers mention that they have seen their kids grow in confidence over the ten days and, as Sir Christopher MacCrae points out: "I have noticed over these trips that the children have gained in confidence, and I suspect that's a lasting thing. Having to get on their hind legs and talk to presidents and prime ministers is in itself a confidence boosting exercise."

A truly unique experience. ■

Experience Pakistan Competition

To enter the competition for 2006 visit the web site at www.experiencepakistan.org.

This years winning schools were: Ashington High School, Northumberland; Eirias High School, Wales; Hodge Hill School, Birmingham; Jeff Joseph Sale Moor Technology College, Manchester; Shenfield High School, Essex