

Proposal in Peshawar by Sally Haywood

It all started when a bomb went off in the next square to where we were looking around Peshawar.

Here's the context. In October 1988, I set off with 21 other people I'd never met before to travel by Bedford truck from London to Nepal. Camping all the way. I'd just left a job as a management consultant, staying in 4 star hotels every night. The group was diverse and, sadly, didn't click particularly well, unlike other groups we met. One guy jumped ship to hook up – and later marry – a girl on another truck.

We had driven through Germany, Austria, Turkey (a few tales here), Syria (fascinating, now destroyed) and Jordan (yes, we visited Petra before there were any hotels or public transport). In those days, Britain was always falling out with either Iran or Iraq. This time it was Iran. I'd have loved to have seen Isfahan – has anyone else been? – but our British driver couldn't go through. They sent in an Australian driver to take a second truck through Iran on his own and meet up with the group in Pakistan. Most of the group had to backtrack from Jordan all the way back up to Istanbul. Food supplies were scarce in the markets and the weather was cold and miserable so their spirits were low.

My tent-mate Ethel, a Canadian teacher, John, a British doctor and I had a few more resources than the others and decided to make a detour to Egypt. Two fantastic weeks in the sun seeing the most amazing sights and adventures. Another VSS for you one day...

So, as we landed in Peshawar two weeks later, most of the group were fed up and bored whilst we were tanned and enthusiastic to experience the next country. I remember being awed at the street stalls selling false teeth – big, clumpy things made out of clay. And we were taken to watch a group of eunuchs dance. Yes, eunuchs actually existed in 1988, men with their bits removed, dancing for money.

The next day, Ethel, a girl called Philippa and I were wandering round the square when a Pakistani man approached us and told us we had to get out of there as a bomb had gone off in the next square. They took us to a place of safety. And, I figured, we had safety in numbers. The man's name was Shah Jahan, the same as the man who built the Taj Mahal. For the next couple of days, he and his brother took us to places we wouldn't otherwise have seen, such as a gorgeous jewellery shop which sparked my love of the lapis lazuli stone, and to a local restaurant where we ate in the back room, as women weren't allowed in the main restaurant. We sat on cushions on the floor and ate out of bowls. The men took a shine to us, gave us garlands of flowers to wear and asked to sleep in our room at the foot of our beds to worship us – nope, we weren't that gullible!!! I did find it hard to turn down the offer of a trip over the Khyber Pass. All the stories of the old hippie trail came to mind but these guys made their money selling refrigerators on the black market and even I knew it wasn't a very clever thing to do, plus we had the rest of the truck trip through India to Nepal to do.

Shah Jahan invited me out in the evening to the cinema and I thought I'd take a chance. The film was some romantic Bollywood-style thing, not very interesting.

What did shock me to the core was when the lights went up (we had arrived late). Not only was I the only woman there but all the men seemed to be engaged in acts of solo gratification, if you know what I mean...Yuk! I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

Undeterred, Shah Jahan asked me to marry him in the car after the film. He said he could get me a job as an English teacher at Peshawar University. He really seemed to mean it whereas I was just on an extended holiday and not the slightest bit interested.

The next day, when I'd returned to the group, there was a vote as to whether to stay in Pakistan or go to India as you could only cross the border on three days of the month. I had the casting vote. I voted to stay. The driver over-ruled me and decided to go as they'd had enough of my disappearing act by then. Reader, it got worse and I left the group, along with Ethel and Philippa, at Agra, in India. A wise decision and we went on to have a great time in Nepal and then Thailand. I soon moved on mentally from Pakistan.

I phoned home for the only time on Christmas Day – I'm sure you will all remember that that's how it was in those days, no emails or Skype, just poste restante postcards and letters. My mum told me they had received a very nice Christmas card from someone called Shah Jahan!