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# Dreaming big in Askole (/news/1046167/dreaming-big-in-askole)

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**“Askoley has the aspect of a very poor village.... a good number of homes are in ruin or empty, as if part of the population had abandoned the country... Few human aggregations are isolated from the world as this small population of Askoley. In front of them lies an infinite succession of glaciers, closed by the bastions of mountains which is the most gigantic of the earth; behind is a savage valley, where for eight months a year, every road is interrupted by severe winter season with its snow, avalanches, arctic cold,” wrote Cavaliere Filippo De Filippi in 1909.**

More than a century later, the words penned by De Filippi, the man who is best known as the leader of the Italian Scientific Expedition to the Himalayas, Karakorum and Chinese Turkestan in 1913-14 and the chronicler of the 1909 Abruzzi expedition to K2, ring true.

Nestled along the Braldo River in Shigar Valley at an altitude of 3000m, Askole is said to be the last settlement in Pakistan. Its claim to fame: it leads to an alpine paradise where four of the five 8000m peaks including K2, Gasherbrum I and II and Broad Peak stand proudly, alongside hundreds of unclimbed 6000m and 7000m peaks.

With the attention of modern mountaineers turning towards the Himalayas in the 19th century and European survey team making its way towards K2 in 1856, remote areas with sheltered communities opened up to outsiders, albeit reluctantly. The dusty town of Askole is a case in

point after it came in the spotlight thanks to a surge in commercial expeditions in the 1980s. But since De Fillipi's 1909 account, not much has changed for the staunchly religious inhabitants in this medieval town.

Reaching Askole from Skardu is a long journey that begins as a fast paced jeep ride on a flat road. However, once the town of Shigar is crossed, the mobile signals disappear and so does the road. What follows next is a seemingly endless journey through rugged terrain on a precariously steep road (dirt track), where one wrong move by the driver could mean death for all the occupants.

Given that most expeditions stay at campsites for a night before leaving for wilderness, exploring Askole is not on the high priority list of many who want to rest their legs before a long walk.

However, stepping outside the campsite, a surreal experience awaits one, with abject poverty being its most visible aspect. You'd come across men, women and children in threadbare fleece and shabby jackets, the branded goods that once offered protection to travelers in below zero temperatures and long discarded, trying their best to stay warm.

While the older inhabitants go about their business, kids tend to flock around visitors, saying 'hello!' to them in Spanish, Italian, German and French all at once. No surprise that the children picked up greetings and a few words of European languages, thanks to the foreign visitors.

Asking for pens and note books and some sweets, the kids will often shout "No photo!" having been instructed by their elders not to get their pictures taken by outsiders.

Seeing the sight of visitors, particularly Pakistani men, local girls avoid eye contact and walk hurriedly. If you happen to be a Pakistani woman however, things are different. Be ready for an impromptu Q&A by the curious women about whether you are a Punjabi (most local visitors are from the five river land) and marital status (if it's a love marriage), with big grins on their faces. For them, seeing white women travelers is a more a common sight than a Pakistani one, particularly single and piques their curiosity.

Once in a while though, brawls erupt when an over enthusiastic traveler starts taking pictures or an immodestly dressed individual (men/women in shorts, tight jeans) or slightly inebriated trekker ventures out, offending the locals.

With almost its entire populace comprising of Shiites, the old Imambargah acts as a focal point that holds the community together.

With beautifully craved wooden pillars and weathered Imam Khomeini posters adorning its exterior, the small centre is in urgent need of renovation. Stepping inside, one feels transported to another era, soft light filters through broken windows and the smell of desi ghee used for lighting oil lamps overpowers ones senses.

The religious devotion of the Askoliites is best summed up in the following excerpt from Adrew Greig's 'Summit Fever: An Armchair Climber's Init(i)Ation to Glencoe, Mortal Terror and 'The Himalayan Matterhorn'.

“That evening, villagers sat outside, waiting to see if the moon would appear to signal end of Ramadan. There was poor weather across Pakistan, but somewhere or other an official observer saw the moon and the feast of Eid was declared across the country for the next day. Even Skardu accepted the official proclamation. But not in Askole. In Askole if they don't see it, it doesn't count.

“So the scrawny goats and chickens were unslaughtered, the sweet pastries unbaked, and the people in Askole went round looking hungry all the next day, anxiously watching the sky.”

In a small place like Askole, religion is what keeps people together, the power of collective prayer giving its residents the faith to pass through the toughest times.

Venturing in the dusty lanes, signboards point towards the Askole House. An initiative of SEED (Social Economic Environment Development) which is promoted by EvK2CNR and financed by the Italian and Pakistani governments, the old house museum is a time capsule, summing up everyday life in the homes of Upper Braldo Valley villages. From metal and wooden kitchenware to taxidermied markhor heads, yak skin boots and ornate jewellery that once was worn by local women and now discarded in favour of fake Chinese jewellery, the

crammed space is not much different from the mud houses that are home for the Askoliites. The visitors log has comments from travelers from most parts of Europe, who are in awe of the local culture and the rustic beauty.

With limited opportunities, the men of Askole have found some sustenance in working as porters., Unlike their peers, the Sherpas from Nepal or close to home the high altitude porters from the Sadpara town, Skardu, who are more urbane and better able to market their services and negotiate good deals, the porters of Askole get the short end.

As evening sets in, the porters begin setting up their makeshift shelters on the fringes of campsites. Their meals are cooked separately and often consist of thick roti and some sweet tea and if they are 'lucky', some leftovers from the expedition dinner. With just a plastic sheet on their heads incase rain comes, they huddle together for warmth, sharing tales while passing around dope and naswaar. For them, each expedition means 'some sustenance'.

Most porters begin young, in their teens, with their ability to adapt to higher altitudes better making them a viable part of any expedition. The saddest are the older ones, who despite their advanced age are competing with younger men to get the attention of the porter sardar, so that they have enough money to pass through the cruel winters.

Sadly, with the Nanga Parbat massacre in June this year, things don't look too well for this little town and its porters. In their carefully worded chatter, they lay the blame on the Kohistanis and Chilasis while venting their frustrations about the lack of financial options for them. 'Sleeping hungry, unable to get warm clothes and medicine for their children' is their nightmarish reality and there seems to be no way out.

With a wage that is barely around 100 dollars per trip and requires them to carry loads weighing around 25kg (plus personal stuff), the porters of Askole risk their lives to make the dreams of hundreds of adventurers true each summer, with barely any acknowledgment or a word of thanks.

"It begins with small steps and small loads. The first time its maybe 10kg on your back. You take a break every few hundred feet, lungs burning, calves aching, but in a day or so you get used to it. Then eventually a 30kg load on your back doesn't matter. All you care about is

getting the cash and some good tips and hopefully a job during winter at a fast food joint in Karachi,” summed up a porter.

Long after a climb is done, Askole becomes a bittersweet memory and rarely features in the annals of self glorification that many an adventurer pens down. Despite not getting its due share, Askole will always be the gateway to glory, with its fair share of fallen heroes and broken dreams.

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