

Welcoming the Artistic taste of Lahore

«Hum Pakistani Fun aur Hunnar
Ko Khush Aamedeed Kehte Hain»



Carpet land.

Welcome to another journey, a particular destination: Lahore, capital of Pakistan. As most of you have been following my recreation in writing these travel articles, it should be no surprise that I chose Lahore as one of my destinations this year, that I am pleased to share with you. The reason behind travelling to Lahore is predominantly due to my late father's constant visits to this part of the world as early as the 1960s when he was in his twenties. His passion for carpets and his curiosity for new art work made Pakistan a common destination in his business trips. Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Peshawar were among the cities he visited. Due to the sensitive situation in Pakistan, I had to postpone the trip on many occasions. Finally, I arrived to Lahore, via Abu Dhabi with Etihad airlines where I was actually very

impressed by the space in the plane and lounge service. It was a very comfortable flight, playing backgammon with my uncle on the iPad made time fly. The funny part is that as soon as I got out of the plane towards passport control, everyone is talking to me in Urdu, their mother tongue. It's no surprise to me that I actually look somehow Pakistani/ Indian/ Arabic / Latino... depending on my hair do and the outfit I am wearing on the day... Hence, they addressed me in Urdu, thinking I am a local and wanting to help me with my suitcase and of course by answering in English, they assumed I am a snobbish Pakistani who refuses to speak the native language. Again it made me smile as my skin color and height do confuse people sometimes and make them wonder about my origins.

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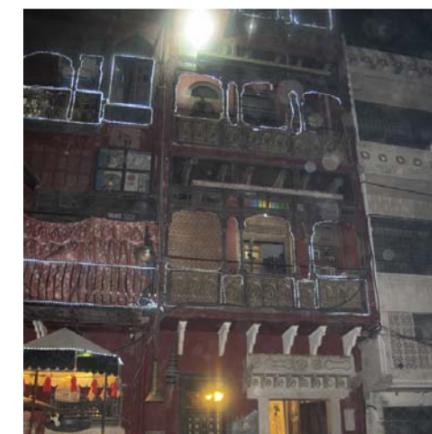
Drinking tea in the traditional way.

Lahore, the heart of Pakistan

To begin with, I would like to start by giving a brief history on Lahore, an ex British colony. The city of Lahore is the capital of the Punjab and is generally called «The Heart of Pakistan». It is a city of gardens and has the reputation of being the «Green City», the city of poets, artists and the center of film industry. Lahore became the centre of social, cultural and educational activities reaching the pinnacle of its glory under the Moghuls/Mughals, since the 16th century, especially in the reign of Akbar the Great who gave it its famous architecture including the magnificent fort, gardens, tombs, mosques and pavilions.

Since the mid 19th century, during the British reign, Moghul, Gothic and Victorian styles of architecture were harmoniously combined. Victorian heritage is next to Mughal monuments. They built some important buildings, like the GPO, High Court, Government College, Museums, National College of Arts, Montgomery Hall, Market, Punjab University (Old Campus) and the Provincial Assembly. With a population of more than 6,563,000 people, Lahore proves to be the cultural, intellectual and artistic center of the nation. Its faded elegance, busy streets and bazaars, and wide variety of Islamic and British architecture make it a city full of atmosphere, contrast and surprises. Even buildings looked like the fashionable patchwork carpets of today. Each block comes in different colored walls and windows. The warm and receptive people of Lahore are known for their traditional hospitality. Like in Iran and Turkey, wherever you go, they like to serve you tea with a basket of fresh fruits and insist you eat at their homes to try their wife or mother's home cooked delicatessen. Their culture is very similar to ours in many ways. They are very close to their family. Family ties are very important. As a matter of fact, it is extremely similar to the Indian culture, where the weddings last 7 days and the groom lives with his parents after marriage in an annex to the main house. It is interesting to know that Lahore has the largest number of educational institutions in the country. Many colleges and schools which found Lahore's reputation as the education center of Pakistan par excellence. Most notable are Government College, the Kinnaird College for Woman and Aitcheson College, and are still the most expensive educational establishment in the country.

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Famous restaurant Coco's building.



Home cooked Afghani food.



Coco's authentic rest in the Old town.

The warm and receptive people of Lahore are known for their traditional hospitality...

Among the places to visit

Lahore Fort, Lahore Badshahi Mosque, Shalamar Gardens, the most famous Badshahi Mosque and 12 Gates of Old Lahore.

The varied cuisine

Pakistani cuisine varies greatly from region to region, reflecting the country's ethnic and cultural diversity. From my experience in Lahore, I highly recommend to dine at Coco's den in the Old city at the rooftop of the building with view overlooking the mosque and the old square. I loved their barbecue and though I asked for mild spice I couldn't finish a bite without a spoon full of yogurt. After dinner, my friends drove between the tiny streets of the Old city, where all kinds of kiosks were open selling jewellery, shampoos and all kinds of bric-a-brac. Then they revealed the news to me that it is also the red district just like in Amsterdam, surprise surprise. This is when I learnt about the «Sheman», men (born as male) who dress and act as women. They are usually dancers during wedding ceremonies as an entertainment or beggars. To get back to the restaurants, you can also add to the list Village restaurant and of course the best food served is evidently at home. ▶



Carpet design on cartoon paper.



Coloring touches on a fine carpet.



Washing the carpet in its final stages.



Final stages shaving the surface of the carpet.

The Art on the Loom

My favorite passion and remedy is touching, feeling and designing my own personalized carpets for my boutique «Oumnia». It boosts my energy. Visiting these huge carpet warehouses, manufactures and ateliers in Lahore was just amazing. Most weavers, designers and dealers were from Afghanistan originally and based in Lahore. The touching part is that 23 years after the passing away of my father, dealers who have worked, joked, ate with, still remember him in details. It was like music to my ear hearing past incidents and anecdotes of my father with these gentlemen back in the 70s and 80s. And of course it was only another way to make me excavate more these carpets and enjoy its art and the challenge that comes with it. As the pictures show, I had the benefit of exploring and learning additional ways in the dyeing techniques especially with natural ingredients, knotting method and detailed procedure to deliver the end product after the technical inspection... Like in Iran, I had the opportunity to create my own carpet with Flying Butterflies among other designs that will be coming off the loom shortly. It is with pleasure that I invite you all to my store to discover these timeless yet contemporary works of art with amazing designs and colors to fill your home. «Fill Your Homes with Stories», this is my new motto at «Oumnia» because carpets and textiles have countless old and interesting stories travelling with each piece before going flat on your floors or hanged on your walls. ▶



Dyeing the wool in yellow with pomegranate.



Sunbathing with the rest of the colored wool on the rooftop.



Cutting a pair of carpets in two.



Executing a patchwork carpet.



Nomad children running once they saw my camera.



Nomad tent in patchwork textiles.

Best places to shop

My ritual in every country is indeed «Shopping». There are a lot of Pakistani talented designers of remarkable taste and creativity. These designers' goods are displayed in different shops. Among the best shops we have: Khaddi, 10Q Gulberg Pakistan Fashion Design Council, Generation, Bareeze in Gulberg and Liberty Boulevard. Liberty and Gulberg are the main markets in modern Lahore in contrast to the Kashmiri, Suha, Chatta, Dabbi and Anarkali of the Old city. The embroidery is so beautiful that I actually made to order beautiful pashmina scarves with pomegranate, ladybugs and singing birds needlework embroidered by village women in Chitral, North of Pakistan. One should also invest in uniquely embroidered handbags, clutches or purses signed Polly & Me, selling in Sydney, Dubai, London and of course in my boutique in Beirut. All these bags are hand embroidered with beautiful colors inspired by the habits and personal stories of talented housewives in Chitral, enabling them to get a good income to survive in their conservative environment while feeling productive in the private sphere.

Of course a cricket match was a must, however I didn't have time to watch one live. Nevertheless, I was impressed to learn that even women have a cricket team: the Pakistan national women's cricket team founded in 1996. It is a game played by both men and women with passion. Among the famous players is the politician Umran Khan, a former talented cricketer himself whom I am a big fan of.

How to reach Lahore by air?

There is an International Airport in the cantonment area, P.I.A. and other international airlines have routes to all major destinations of the world. Lahore airport is one of the busiest airports of the country after Karachi international terminal. From Beirut, you may travel via Doha, Istanbul, Abu Dhabi or Dubai for the closest routing. Take care and Khuda Hafiz ■