

Guns, Bribes and Steel

Finding the Gunsmiths of Darra

A ceiling fan tried its best to disperse the smell of sweat and moldy paper in the tiny room.

Starting to get impatient I asked “So when could I have the permits?”

The government employees’ third chin wobbled with a gloating smug as he huffed in his thick Pakistani accent;

“Tomorrow. Of course, I’d love to put two stamps on your permit and sign it right now. But I’m afraid you haven’t even asked if you can invite me lunch yet...”.

I felt rather stupid not having realized his bribe request earlier, and replied with an understanding smile; “Oh I’m sorry! Is two hundred rupees a good lunch for you sir?”

The inflated man clearly enjoyed his inflated power over the pasty white tourist with a head wobble. His chunky fingers confidently grabbed the stamp, slammed it on the papers twice, signed, and, in an obviously habitual manner, made the rupee bills disappear in his jacket pocket, “Yessir – that is a very good lunch indeed. I enjoy it very much. Have a good trip sir!”

We laughed in understanding, while I thought to myself; damned bastard.

But I had the permit in hand. The permit that would allow me to leave the confines of the mapped world and enter the wild wild west of the subcontinent.



Nightmarket in Peshawar

Myths and rumors lured me to it. A lawless part of the world, where state and civil laws ceased to exist, and ancient tribal laws settled all sorts of disputes and conflicts. An utmost neutrality – unallied to a flag or a nation, the tribal areas are a rugged terrain wedged between Pakistan and Afghanistan that inspired a rare sense of adventure.

I walked out of the colorless gray building, back onto the dusty chaos of Peshawar and lit up a cigarette. The frontier town at the edge of a great desert – where the tribes of the regions meet, mingle and trade. Colorful dresses, burqas, shalwar kameez's' – regional varieties in dress and cuisine roam the desert streets. Different tongues sing different songs. The steam of chai kettles and open fired meats make the hot air even hotter. A whiff of lawlessness and a bygone era lies in the air. I time travelled into an age of exploration, where google maps was unheard of, and trip advisors failed to advise of trips.

Before jumping into a rickshaw, a white man came up to me, seemingly out of nowhere.



Sunset in Peshawar

He greeted me in an unnatural friendliness which took me aback. Too friendly. He looked like someone who has travelled – sort of. His clothes were too clean, his beard too tidy. Not like a backpacker, or a journalist. There was something too suave about him.

“So where are you headed to?” he asked quite up front.

“I’ll be travelling south tomorrow. Have an early start.” I replied, feeling rather cornered.

“Want to grab some chai?” he insisted. Again, too friendly.

“Nah thanks – safe travels!” I called out, turned, walked away and jumped into the nearest rickshaw.

My suspicion got the best of me.

And yet the past four weeks in Pakistan have been accompanied by constant rumors and whispers – of people being approached by spies of all factions. The ISI, the CIA, the MI5.



A songbird seller

A country at an endless war with neighboring India, with tribal areas home to the Taliban, gigantic China to the north, and here, just a few kilometers away from war torn Afghanistan, occupied by a US led coalition.

And Peshawar in the middle – an obvious confluence of interests and agencies. Of rumors and shadows. Of eyes and ears everywhere.

Of course they were here. They probably knew my travel plans before I even thought of them in the first place. A white face in this region doesn't go unregistered.

Until today I have no idea if that man really was a spy or from some agency – maybe he was just a fellow traveller seeking advice or company. But I went with my gut on it and tried to ignore the uneasy feeling that encounter left me with. When going to places with no guide books, the gut gives the best advice.

I went back to my hotel and watched the sun set from my room. Accompanied by the hypnotizing songs of the muezzins I took a few sips of my smuggled whiskey. Of course alcohol was forbidden here. As would be my little excursion.



Father and daughter

Early next morning I was back at yet another bus stop. A grand convergence of rusting metallic beasts spewing their black smoke. Smell of diesel and urine pierced the air as I boarded the sardine can of a bus. The road out into the valleys was surprisingly well maintained, unlike the potholed roads to the north. I soon came to realize that I was once again a fool. A lawless place of drug plantations and weapon smuggling, next to a war-torn country? Of course good roads would be needed. If the real money-making interests are met, then why shouldn't there be investments into infrastructure.

I had always thought that entering these "off-the-grid" places would involve many angry looking security personnel and soldiers, but was again surprised at their curiosity at every checkpoint. "A white man? Here? A tourist?". They always laughed and greeted with joy. Close to inviting me for some tea and cigarettes.

In fact their fascination with me started to annoy the other passengers on the bus, seeing that I delayed the ride at every one of the numerous checkpoints.



Blasting Bollywood music while working on an AK47

The smooth ride came to a sudden halt.

“DARRA!” a man up front yelled into the bus.

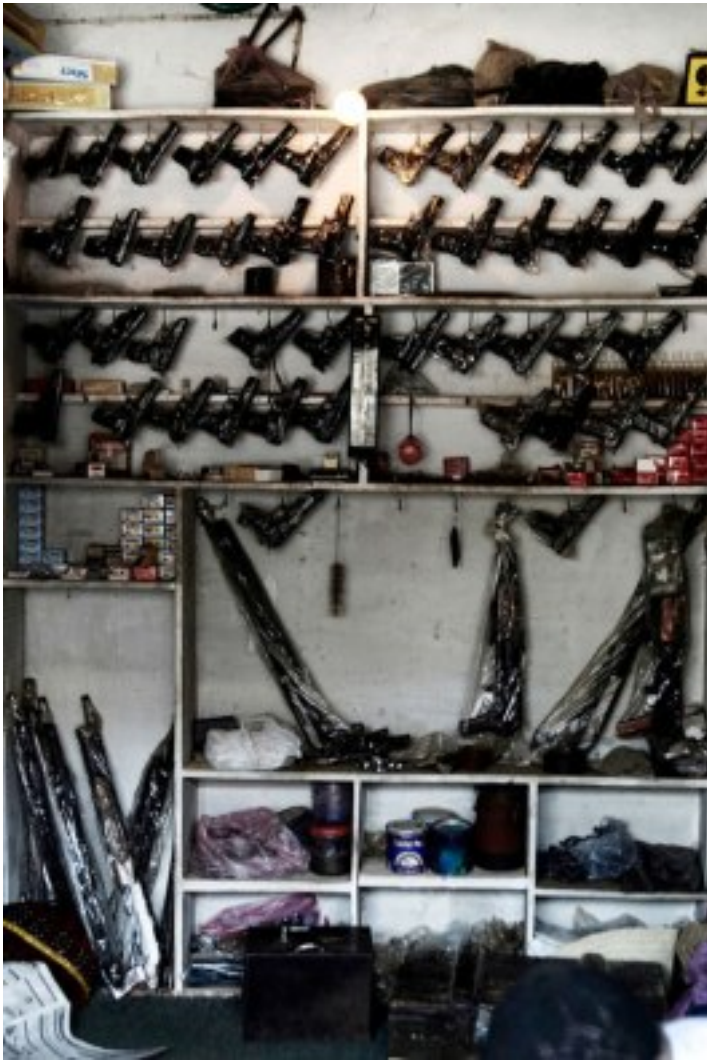
“Darra? Is this Darra?” I started asking my neighbors.

Their heads wobbled affirmingly. “yes yes. Yesyes”.

I took my daypack, slung it around my back and jumped off the bus.

As the dust cleared, a tiny dusty road aligned with little concrete houses and trees appeared. And then gunshots.

First on one side of the road – rapid bursts of machine gun fire pierced the air.



A shop and the plastic covered merchandise.

My body froze. My eyes shot open. Adrenaline rushed through my body.

Then the other side of the road answered with even more deafening bursts.

As if fireworks exploded next to my ears, the shooting wouldn't stop.

I exhaled. I looked around.

More salvos from behind the buildings. I was surrounded.

And yet there were two men sitting on the street talking, drinking chai. In almost meditative states. It was a surreal site; While shots were fired all around, they were quietly enjoying themselves.

More shots from down the road. A man dressed in a black shalwar came out of one the buildings, saw me and gestured slowly, peacefully.



A gunsmith in Darra

“Come come. Come inside. Get off the road.” His deep voice calm and steady.

I ran over to the shop amidst the terrorizing sound of gunfire coming from all sides and we shook hands. He had kind, hazel eyes and a welcoming smile. His deep voice echoed “Hello howdoyoudosir? I am Mohammad. You want tour right?”

The tension faded. “Yes I do indeed” I sighed with relief.

Being in a strange, forbidden part of the world as a white guy, surrounded by bearded men with guns causes the entire body to clench up. There was a constant quiet voice in the back of my head whispering; “you really shouldn’t be here you idiot”. Although my gut told me it was going to be alright, I almost relieved myself in that moment. I had arrived – infamous Darra Adam Khel.

“2000 Rupees for tour. Bullets cost extra. Would you like some chai?” Mohammad didn’t hesitate. Barely being able to agree, he started rattling down the history of Darra.

For over a century the towns in this region have specialized on producing a wide variety of weapons. Adapting techniques and models, they can reproduce American, Russian and Chinese guns within a few days. AK47s, M-16 rifles, handguns, shotguns. An analogue form of copying and pasting.

We walked through the tiny neon lit rooms. Next to the loud gunfire outside, the rooms were loud in their own way. Tiny hammers slamming loudly on metal, bit by bit. Metal hitting metal, Files filing away excess of barrels. Loud Bollywood music screeching out of antiquated radios at volumes as loud as the gun salvos.



Filing on the sheet template

Men of all ages were working on breakneck speed. Using sheet-made templates in a morbid Lego-toolkit sort of way.

While one was filing the barrel, the other one was assembling the cock. Using cheap, household tools.

“Between 600 and 700 weapons are produced by the gunsmiths every day.” Mohammad said proudly. Always highlighting the efficiency and expertise of the workers in his factory. It was hard to fact check him on the spot.

“We get a brand new model of gun, and in one week we will be able to reproduce it...” he gloated. And while I watched the meticulous work being done, the shots outside simply continued. Weapons were being tested. All day. Every day.



Recycling bullet shells

“And do you produce any other guns – or only the smaller caliber...? I asked – knowing of rumors of anti-aircraft missiles and rocket launchers in the towns deeper inside the tribal areas.

“Nooo. Oh no. Not here. This is in other place.“ He said reassuringly.

“What about tanks?” I joked.

And all of a sudden he seemed to drift away to a nearly forgotten, traumatic memory. Staring into nothing he mumbled "...would be a very bad idea if they had tanks here...".

Snapping out, it was interesting to connect the dots. The paved roads, the Taliban and the war around the literal corner, the weed and opium plantations that are plainly visible from the road.

While the gunsmiths pass on their expertise of weapons over generations, the world around them passes on from one conflict to the next.

We walked down a little corridor where a man was sitting comfortably on the floor, sorting used bullet shells according to their caliber. "That's what I call recycling" I chuckled to myself. In fact, that was exactly what he was doing – preparing bullet shells for a refill.

We came to a little room Mohammad called the shop, in which a wide range of different guns were hanging on racks and lying on shelves. All inside plastic bags protecting them from the dusty air and sand.



The everyday tools used to build guns

But there was another sight that surprised me even more. Playing around with some of those pistols were a Chinese couple and a young French guy. Tourists!

Here! Of all places! With them, another man in a black shalwar, greeting Mohammad and me upon entering. He had just finished their tour and we were all coming to the exciting part of deciding whether we want to try some of the guns. In a strange sense I felt my experience, great as it was, was slightly less unique all of a sudden. Maybe I'm not quite as uniquely adventurous as I thought I was.

Trying to ignore that thought I focused on the next task at hand – the shooting. I never cared much for guns, but from my compulsory military service I did learn to fire them. And although there were so many options to choose from and to try, the only one that fascinated me was the infamous Kalashnikov. Printed on coins and countries flags, I wanted to use the opportunity to try to shoot one of those. Of course, I used quite a few other guns for picture opportunities – and I had to realize that instead of looking “badass” with one of these things, I looked rather miserable and hopelessly lost. More like a kid about to hurt himself really badly.



A Chinese tourist showing off a weapon

After everyone decided on how many bullets they would buy, we wandered down behind the row of buildings to an open field. A bunch of children carrying big cardboard boxes came out of nowhere and followed us to the ridge.

Guns were loaded, and first the Chinese guy shot his rounds into the hills afar. With every shot fired, a steaming hot bullet shell would be catapulted from the

side of the gun, where the children were holding the boxes to catch them. Recycling at its best! It seemed a bit like a truth or dare game, where some kids would dare to catch the burning hot pieces of metal with their hands.



Murals on the walls

The Chinese tourist finished up, my bought magazine was attached and once again, I looked rather hopeless. Of course I wanted to seem cool and take it with ease – but I’m always surprised how heavy these things really are. As always when holding a gun the most adequate expression of how I felt would be “terrified”. Fidgeting and clumsy, I did manage to hold up the heavy weapon, aim and fire a quick and senseless round of bullets into the distance. The kids were happy, catching all the shells, and the kick of shooting was over. My shoulder in instant pain from the backlash.

After these few hours, the continuous bursts of gunshots around me had turned into a background noise. I didn't wince every time anymore. Only every third time. We headed back to the shop, where Mohammad explained that its not possible to buy anything. There was the temptation to buy a "Pen-Gun" (a gun in the shape of a fountain pen that carries one bullet). On the other hand, Pakistani prison wasn't.

"They see your white face, they check your bags. Having guns like this is illegal in Pakistan."

"How much would it be?" I asked, "For, let's say one of the AK47s".

"Oh that is different. If you take original model then its a few thousand. One of our Darra guns is about a hundred dollars."



Preparing the next step of production

"U.S. dollars?" all of us were taken surprised, for it seemed too cheap.

The two guides in their black shalwar's started getting a bit restless. They knew that having us tourists around is always a bit of a risk with the security in the area. Foreigners can quickly be more trouble than they're worth, and they both started pushing us to take the next bus back to Peshawar. We all noticed the unease and complied.

The road back to Peshawar was smooth again, and upon coming to the first check point there was a bit of confusion. Some of the soldiers wanted to search us, the others couldn't be bothered. Not as friendly as on the way to Darra, they eventually just waved the bus through and we didn't have any baggage searching ordeal to experience.

Getting out at the bus stop in Peshawar we tourists parted ways. The French guy giggled, took me to the side and showed me a pen gun.

“Thankfully they didn't check us!” showing off the little device with a smug grin.

The thought of what would've happened to all of us if he had been caught flashed before my eyes.

If looks could kill, I shot him in his head.



*A tourist testing an
AK47*



Children catching the bullet-shells