

A tale of pickles, puppet shows and Punjabi wrestling



There is a huge gap between the Pakistan of the 24-hour bad news cycle and the real Pakistan, founded on Islamic values of charity, hospitality and mutual support, writes **Julian Saunders**

I ARRIVE IN Karachi during Pakistan's 70th Anniversary celebrations and head down to the offices of Dawn Media Group, founded by Mohammad Ali Jinnah (the first leader of Pakistan) in 1947. My car is first checked underneath for bombs and then I go through two phases of airport-style scanning before I get to the entrance. This security is typical of all the big hotels, and is unchanged since my first visit eight years ago. I no longer notice it.

Dawn is producing a series of supplements about the history of Pakistan. On the cover, Jinnah looks every inch the sophisticated London-trained lawyer. A feature on the founding fathers starts with a quote from Charles Dickens: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness..."

An anglophile thread runs through Pakistani culture (more so than in India, in my experience). In Lahore, my guide points out the great irrigation system, which helps make the Punjab the breadbasket of the country, and says: "Built by the British."

I say: "Aren't you just being polite to a visitor. Surely Pakistanis must blame Britain for the ghastly violence of Partition?"

He says: "Not particularly. It was complex."

Partition was a time of brutal killings and mass dislocation. Yet, in Pakistan, the mood is of national pride and optimism. Mariam Ali Baig, the editor of *Aurora*, Pakistan's leading advertising, marketing and media magazine, explains that demographics and the economy are a factor. The median age of Pakistan is 22.7 years – with 35% under the age of 14 – and is increasingly urban. Foreign direct investment (FDI) has surged – mainly due to the Chinese. This is the big story – less often told – that is framing Pakistan's future.

My seminar in Karachi ('Brand-building in the digital age') is sold out, with 40 attendees. The workshops take much longer than usual and I have to cut out content as the day unfolds. In Lahore, I cut out even more as I have to allow two hours for prayers and lunch. In the event, only half go to prayers and the rest have a leisurely lunch in which I chat to two former army officers who seem to be the most sophisticated and highly educated people in the room.

The old city of Lahore is laid out on medieval lines with trades concentrated in particular quarters (gold, diamonds, musical instruments, etc.). After two hours of wandering (in which I

have run into only one other tourist, a Japanese), I chance upon a maker of pickles.

His brother lives in Tooting and he last visited London 15 years ago. After tasting most of his wares, I offer to buy one with bitter melon, which I can't find in London. "There is no charge," he says, as he hands me a large jar of it. "You are a guest in our country."

At dinner, we over-order (in fact, at most meals we over-order). The spare food is packed up for us to take away. Hassan Javed, my host from the Pakistan Advertisers Society, and I walk out into the old city. We give the food to a family that performs puppet shows on the streets – much like Punch and Judy, only less violent. Next day, Imran Ali, my guide, tells me that he is a follower of a great Sufi saint, Data Ganj Bakhsh, and every year he and a few friends put on a big feast in his honour and invite hundreds of poor people from his district.

Imran takes me to see Punjabi wrestling in a muddy field on the outskirts of Lahore. I sit between 'the landlord' and two guys on a bed, who are welders. 'The landlord' is the wealthiest man in the district; he funds the school of 60 wrestlers and is proud that one has a bronze medal at the Commonwealth Games. Many young men use wrestling as a stepping stone to get into the army. The welders are in a bantering mood. They speculate about my identity and tell me that they think I am from Peshawar, not London, which I find confusing until a wrestler from Peshawar turns up and a photocall is demanded. "Separated at birth," say the welders in Punjabi.

There is a frustrating gap between the reality of visiting Pakistan and the image of the country abroad: 24-hour news media feed on bad news stories, so the image that stays in the mind is of a TV journalist reporting on violence and human tragedy. Institutions in Pakistan – apart from the army – are weak, and politics is dominated by dynastic families with regional power bases.

Yet this is a strong society in which people live out personal and Islamic values of charity, hospitality and mutual support – a story that you will not really understand from Western media unless you visit. I am looking forward to returning.

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