

American Family in Pakistan  
by Patty Steelman



Tour of Faisal Mosque. Females required to wear head scarves. Rebecca is in the middle with her friends Heather and Samantha.

My husband and I are both former Peace Corps Volunteers who wanted to continue to do humanitarian work. Richard worked for CARE and later for USAID. Our children were born in Latin America and were comfortable speaking Spanish but when Richard was offered a position in Pakistan, we thought it would be a good opportunity to learn about a different part of the world. It proved to be very different indeed.

Jacob was entering 10th grade and Rebecca 7th grade when we arrived in Islamabad in 1990. Our first impressions were of heat, a city still under construction, the modern government buildings, and the impressive Faisal Mosque. Islamabad is a planned capitol city like Brasilia. The “real” Pakistan is in Rawalpindi, a long established city of neighborhood markets with dusty narrow winding streets about 15 minutes away.

At the International School of Islamabad and at home, we could wear American style clothing but out in public we were advised to wear scarves on female heads, caps on male, and clothing from neck to ankle. One hot day, Jacob decided to ride his bike to cool off. Without thinking about it, he rode off in shorts. He soon returned because some men and boys threw rocks at him.

While Jacob could go out alone, Rebecca could not. As a thirteen-year-old, she was viewed as a potential bride. She had long hair streaked blond by the sun and was small for her age but she was attractive to young male shop assistants. If Rebecca wanted to visit her friend who lived one house away, Jacob would escort her. The school bus stopped at our front gate and waited to be sure Rebecca arrived safely inside. In contrast, Jacob and his friends (one Afghan and the other Finnish) went on hikes and camped overnight in the Margala Hills on the edge of Islamabad without incident.

Both Jacob and Rebecca loved taking gymnastics in Guatemala but neither gymnastics nor competitive swimming was available in Islamabad. (Gymnastic outfits and bathing suits do not meet Islamic dress codes.) Jacob and Rebecca tried a variety of new activities and found new interests. Jacob continued with soccer and took up field hockey which is a boys only sport there. Rebecca enjoyed the drama group at school and performed in *The Sound of Music*. Jacob traveled to The Hague with the school team for Model United Nations sessions. Our son went on school sponsored trek to the foothills of Nanga Parbat. His group was caught in a hundred year snow storm and had to be helicoptered out by the Pakistani Army. It was the highlight of the trek.

The food in northern Pakistan is similar to Afghan and Punjabi dishes. Delicious kebabs and grilled meats (no pork as that is forbidden in Islam), cooked vegetables, and rice. We all loved the naan—freshly baked bread, hot from a tandoori oven. There were rolling blackouts in our neighborhood from 6 to 9 pm. We made sure dinner was cooked before 6 and then ate by candlelight.

Jacob graduated in June 1993 treading on Afghan carpets covering the path to the auditorium. The guest speaker at the graduation ceremony was Benazir Bhutto, the former Prime Minister. She explained beforehand that because we were in Islamabad she would not be shaking hands with the graduates when she gave out the diplomas. She had to be careful because if someone photographed her shaking hands with a male who was not her relative, the photo might be used in the press to damage or ruin her political career.

Jacob departed to Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, near his grandparents in Austin. Rebecca moved to Cairo, Egypt with us for her last three years of high school. Jacob came to visit us on vacations and we enjoyed new adventures along the Nile. We feel that living and traveling in many countries benefited our children, increasing their awareness of people's lifestyles, beliefs, and commonality. We feel they are better citizens of the world because of their upbringing.