

Beware the Infidel with the Weenie in his Hand.

By Mark Elder

*Looking across a river,
I see a boy with a bottom like a peach,
But I am sad,
because I cannot swim.*

Persian Poem

Their fingers were entwined like brown rivulets of Himalayan slurry. I tried not to stare as the younger guy spoke. "Meet us tonight at Khyber Bazaar, in the old city." said Aijaz. "Come about 8.30". The way his arm was draped languidly around Mohammed's shoulders said, well in Sydney anyway, *big frock cabaret*. But Peshawar is a long way from Sydney. In fact, it's a long way from anywhere – except, the famous Khyber Pass. The place that's launched a thousand bum jokes and arguably the best Carry On film so far.

Peshawar sits nestled uneasily amongst the wild tribal lands of the NorthWest Frontier Province. Outside the city, in the fort-encrusted Pashtun lands, is a veritable no-man's land. The British couldn't tame these people and the Pakistani Government is certainly not going to try. In fact the only thing the British got from here was a cute bit of rhyming slang and dysentery.

You can find anything here. Vast supplies of Afghan drugs, cheap guns and artillery. Mercenaries from Tajikistan. Black-market antiquities from Iran. There are even rumours of slave trading. It's relatively easy to get a private army together here, but it's damn near impossible to throw your leg over.

They don't drink in this conservative part of a devoutly Islamic country, so your pulling potential is greatly diminished. That, and the scarcity of talent. What few women you see are completely covered in tent-like outfits called *burqah*. After a few weeks here just a glimpse of an ankle is enough to guarantee a twitch downstairs.

Nightlife *is* limited, so when my friends mentioned a visit to the local porn cinema, I decided to give the sheep the night off and join them. I just prayed to Allah that there would be chicks in these films. I wasn't really ready for *Ali Baba and The Forty Thieves - The Clusterfuck Years*.

During the day Khyber Bazaar is like any marketplace in Pakistan. It's an intense labyrinth of claustrophobic streets and dark passages that is bursting with overstuffed shops. A screaming mass of traffic spews forth an almost liquid belch of pollution. Donkeys and bullocks struggle for space against

the endless tide of tongas, motorbikes and rickshaws. At night, though, it's a whole different ballgame - a dark maze of pitch-black tunnels.

I kept telling myself that I was walking fast because of the bitterly cold autumn air. Across a small sewerage canal, up a very rickety flight of stairs and I found my friends small office.

After a cup of *khawa* - the delicious Pashtun green tea – we set off in Mohammed's beaten up Hillman. "It's my father-in-laws car, actually," he said between coughs on a local cigarette. "He lets me drive it as an incentive to stay married to his daughter." Both men are living in the purgatory of arranged marriages. Aijaz quite likes his wife and feels that he's lucky. Mohammed, on the other hand, figures that he got the short straw. But, even though he patently loathes the woman, he keeps his feelings mostly to himself. Several times I nearly slag off his missus just to stoke the warming fires of camaraderie. While that is usually welcomed in Australia, in Pakistan it can get you a dagger up the arse.

We stopped in a quiet street on the northern side of town. A sign nearby said "Seek help from Almighty Allah". I reminded myself to do that later. Since both men were wearing the loose, lightweight suits known as *shalwar qamiz* they wrapped large shawls around them to keep them from freezing. It was also probably a good way to stop from being recognized.

The cinema was surprisingly large. Out the front was the typical hand-painted marquee that adorns picture houses from here to Madras - a brace of Pakistani love-goddesses with eyes that said "Show us your gun, Akmed." A thirty foot reinforced concrete fence surrounded the place. It looked like the *Bob's Country Bunker* of Porn. The only way in was through a wide gateway, manned by a double-line of armed guards. They were frisking everybody who went in. I was thinking maybe I might feel like that *after* the show, but I wasn't quite ready for it now.

"They have a lot of trouble with the fundamentalists," Aijaz explained as a bloke with a face like Yoda gave my balls a good squeeze, "they've had suicide attacks with bombs strapped to them. Or they'll bring in a few Kalashnikovs and maybe some grenades and try and kill as many people as possible."

What an appalling way to go. You're sitting there with your trousers round your ankles choking the chicken and some towel-head pops a cap in your arse. I was going to find it very hard to concentrate on the screen with that sort of danger hanging around. And I'd forgotten to bring tissues.

The men shuffled nervously around the courtyard, avoiding eye contact. Businessmen from Islamabad, Afghani traders and Punjabi truck drivers all merged together in an uneasy cultural soup. A small group of Balti men gathered round a display board ogling at the pictures of fat Pashtun prostitutes. Small boys sold sweets and cigarettes from large trays balanced tentatively on their heads. Bizarrely, a huge mural of Princess Diana dominated the scene.

Mohammed told me some more about the place. "It nearly burnt down a few years ago," he said. "It was a legitimate cinema then, showing Indian films. It's been officially closed ever since. They have three shows every day - three hours each, which is quite a marathon." I'll say. At 20 rupees (fifty cents) a ticket that's pretty good value. Although as a foreigner I was charged 60 rupees.

But what does everyone do here after sitting through three hours of jiggy jiggy. "We are lucky," answered Aijaz. "Because we have wives at home. But for a lot of men their only outlet is with a prostitute, if they can find one, or by erm, other means. You'll notice, for example, that a lot of the truck drivers bring their boys with them." Hmm, I wonder if they come with reversing lights.

Shuffling inside, extremely loud, tinny music echoed through the foyer as we were jostled up the stairs. We soon burst into the cloying blackness and staggered around till our eyes adjusted. The place reeked of cigarettes, hash and, stale, multi-layered sweat.

Downstairs was littered with debris and the ragged evidence of the past fire that had forever changed the nature of this place. There were also private booths up the back. Maybe that's where the truck drivers practice shunting.

First we were treated to a highly amusing collection of advertisements. The wonders of cough mixture, tinea creams and glucose drinks were touted to the restless and disinterested audience.

Then came six films that were Pashtun homemade offerings. These consisted of prostitutes/actresses wiggling their overly ample squidgy bits. They wore wigs in a desperate and unsuccessful attempt to conceal their identities and stared off-camera with a resigned shell-shocked look. Occasionally a bloke with a fake moustache appeared and gave them his best bad gringo look as he fondled his rifle.

We were tortured with endless close-ups of these poor women kneading tits like a bad tape loop. The under the crotch shot seemed to be particularly popular. The effect on the girl-starved audience was electric. In each film the girl would dance and grind herself into a hypnotic frenzy. It reminded me of Dorothy clicking her heels together and saying, "there's no place like home. There's no place like home."

When a tired-in-a-Shelly-Winters-kind-of-way mama was dancing around in a wet T-shirt, Aijaz informed me that she was, "Nusrat Shaheem, a famous Pashtun sex-symbol who is down on her luck and very broke".

Then came six or seven Indian flicks. And while these weren't pornographic in the true sense of the word, they were incredibly erotic. These high budget, slick productions are very popular in Pakistan and I can see why. The girls were incredibly beautiful with enough of their well-shaped bodies revealed to guarantee a bit of wood. Maybe I was regressing to my childhood but they all looked like Barbara Eden in *I dream of Genie*.

A big crowd pleaser was Madhuri Dixit, a vampy pouting tease with a particularly endearing arse. When she came on the screen I noticed that half the audience adjusted their shawls over their laps.

Occasionally, the ticket collector would walk around and shine his torch on everyone in the theatre. Aijaz said that he was just checking the number of people. But he did it so often that I think he was checking to see that no one had smuggled in a goat or that one of the truck drivers hadn't dropped the clutch up the chocolate highway.

Eventually the screen lit up with a Californian looking chick being rodgered on a kitchen table. After the previous rather coy offerings this piston-like close-up was a bit of a shock. All the hardcore stuff is American but it comes in from Europe so it's dubbed in German, which makes for quite a cross-cultural evening.

Eventually, at the end of a rather accomplished skin-flute solo, the blonde swallowed a mouthful. This had a dramatic and profound effect on everyone in the theatre as they clear their throats and spat great gobs of flem and disgust on the sticky, wood floor.

After another four or five hardcore films it's time for intermission. As we have a cigarette in the courtyard, I notice a profound change in the crowd. The previously shy men, now flushed with lust, began to check each other out and look for signs of reciprocal interest. We decided it was a good time to get going.

As we stepped out into the dark street, I noticed that my friends seemed strangely keen to get home, so I graciously declined a lift. As they drove off in Mohammed's decrepit old car I hailed a taxi with my rather twitchy right hand.