

Vale of death

Pakistan's Switzerland on Fire

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Kalam area Swat

SWAT, popular as 'the Valley of Hanging Chains' the very appellation invokes images of unsurpassed beauty—majestic mountains, mesmerizing long stretches of valleys, magical lakes, arresting rivers, verdant pine forests, emerald mines, rich flora and fauna and charming landscapes with the mighty Hindukush as its backdrop. Swat is located in the North Western Frontier of Pakistan (NWFP). This extravagantly beautiful valley is nestled in the foothills of dazzling Hindukush mountain range and is 300 kms from Pakistan's capital Islamabad. Swat's idyllic lineage dates back to thousands of years when it was one of the cradles of Buddhism and a centre of Gandhara civilization. Swat was an independent princely state till 1969 when it formally became a part of NWFP. This mythological and serene vale often dubbed as

'Switzerland of the East' used to be one of Pakistan's primary tourist hubs.

What makes this region more special is the abundance of nature's endowments in the form of its lush meadows, snow-covered mountains, varying topography, Buddhist heritage, elegant hotels, clear waters, fabled lakes, monuments, gardens, pilgrimage, bird watching, archaeological relics, trout fishing, exotic cuisines and everything tourists desire for. The swift-flowing Swat River

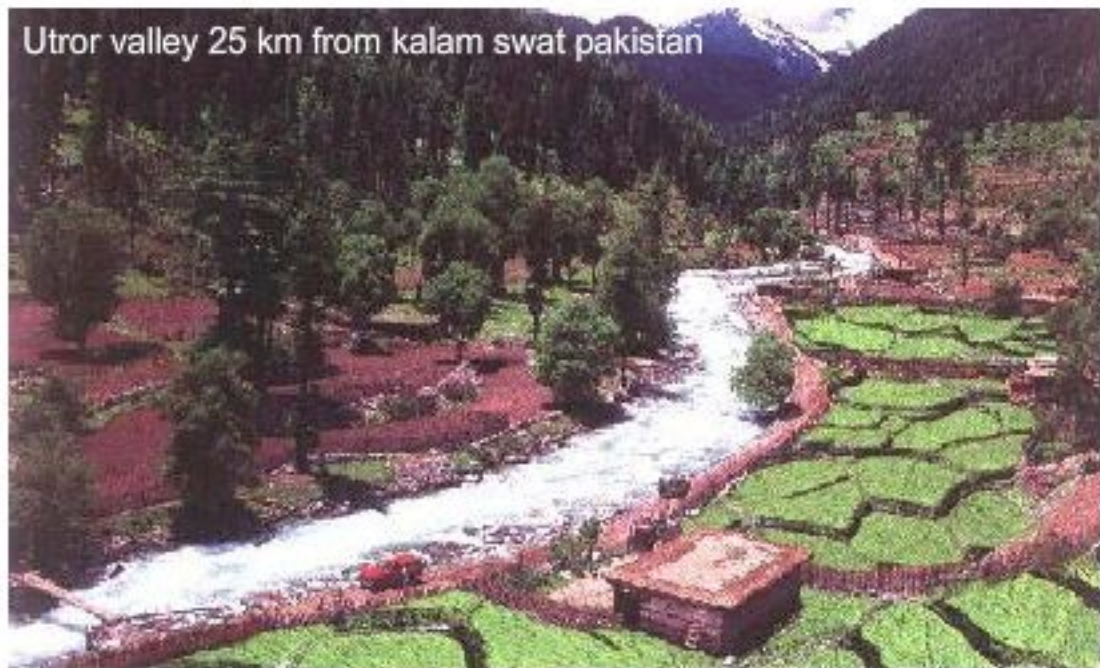
coils its way across the scintillating valley. Scenic highlights along this river route include the beautiful valleys, picturesque small towns and undulating mountain ranges on whose higher slopes give way to dense pine forests. Swat's beguiling locales have attracted tourists not just from all over the country but also from the world across. For visitors Swat is a feast for the eyes and mind.

Tourism was a key source of income for populous of Swat. But now, the industry is undergoing

Dudipatsar lake.jpg



Utror valley 25 km from kalam swat pakistan



its worst crisis in 40 years. In recent times, the region of Swat has become a 'vale of death' and terror. The declining security situation and serious civil disturbances starting in late 2002 and the subsequent violence which flared up again in late 2007 severely damaged repute of tourism in the region. In 2008, the only ski resort of Pakistan in Malam Jabba, Swat was burned down by militants. The ski resort came equipped with a helipad. Concern about the damage caused by the

violent clashes in the region led to a dramatic decline in tourism revenues. Swat denizens found it hard to do business as very few tourists were visiting the area due to continued insurgency in the region.

Tourism in post 9/11

Tourism is one of the world's rapidly expanding economic industries. Wars, civil strife, instability, protests, can have many ramifications for country's industry. In the post 9/11, Muslim world gravely suffered the brunt

of New York attacks. The global launch of US 'war on terror' had dire implications for economies and tourist industries of the Muslim world. The tourism in many regions of the world began to decline. However, one of the highly victimised nations of the war on terror is the country of Pakistan. In fact, the country has also been identified among the sixty-six (66) countries severely affected since the war on terror commenced after 9/11. Moreover, what is interesting that due to Pakistan's socio-cultural mix and its geographic

position, the country has become both a target and a source of conflict that has allegedly contributed to the American war. Such decision of forming alliances with America and infringing ties with former Taliban authorities in Afghanistan did not come without a price.

Thus, no area of Pakistan suffered more from the conflict in Afghanistan, than NWFP. NWFP runs along the border with Afghanistan. The indigenous inhabitants of this small province are mainly



Bahrin

Buddha-of-Swat



Pathans, and local language is Pushtoon. In the post 9/11, following the American occupation of Afghanistan, NWFP economy witnessed a fall as tourism began to decline steadily in some parts of the province.

Despite the bombing campaign that galvanized in Afghanistan throughout the late 2001, tourism in Swat remained free from the hostile vibes of across border tribulations. Domestic tourists continued to flock to this arresting valley in huge number. It's important to note that Swat has a history of remaining free

from communal riots compared to the rest of Pakistan. However, it wasn't long before Swat was caught in the eye of storm, terror sporadically continued as the tourists started to avoid the vale in unison. In 2007, 'lonely planet' and foreign offices were issuing warnings to avoid travels to Swat. The protest and anger generated before and during the war started to take on a new dimension with increased militant insurgency and anti-government movements in the region. The Pak-American alliance on war on terror also helped develop a culture of

antagonism in the country and created a breeding ground for new ideologies.

Islamist militants under the leadership of Maulana Fazlullah launched counter offensive against government by firing upon its security officials and attacking executive bodies. Later this basic structure of warfare escalated into violent and bloody confrontation. The attempt by local authorities to crack down on militants failed and the state

government of Swat was replaced by the rule of Mualna and his supporters. In November 2007, mounting tension between Pakistani army and the followers of Maulana Fazlullah escalated into full fledged warfare. Over 20,000 troops were mobilised and 200 militants killed. Violent aftershocks continued throughout 2008 and 2009, putting Swat out of bounds to travellers. The prospect of achieving a long lasting peace



Kalam-Swat



Mahodanad Lake, swat

collapsed when Pakistani government forces launched a major counter attack on the insurgents in May 2009, thus creating a largest humanitarian catastrophe and displacement of locals in the history of Pakistan. Present resumption of violence has claimed over thousands of lives and has displaced nearly 2 million people. The conflict has forced millions of inhabitants to flee their homes. The majority of the displaced people have gathered in camps or are forced to live with the host families and relatives. Food supplies, safe water and shelter are in short supply.

As the war on terror enters its eighth year now, Pakistan has become a hostile land of poor governance, weakening economy, suicide bombings, and civil unrests. Further US drone attacks on civilians residing along the Pak-Afghan border has further destabilised the country and its tourist industry. Pakistan, which experienced prolonged political turmoil in recent year, is now struggling with the impending recession and the war in Swat. The ongoing clashes and the resultant instability has put not just Swat but also other areas of Pakistan out of bound for travellers.

Prominent attractions of Swat- Prior to War on terror

Over the years, Swat tourism did come a long way. Tourists were everywhere, soaking up all that valley had to offer - the walks, the treks, the cuisine. Before the war on terror spilled into Swat, every summer weekend the valley was brimming with tourists enjoying temperatures lovingly cooler than that available elsewhere in Pakistan. Swat was also the most sought-after honeymoon destination for couples. Indeed, Swat an astonishing land has a lot to

overwhelm its tourists.

Swat is also the vast fruit-growing empire in Pakistan, its orchards produce the fruit of an exquisite flavour such as wild fig, berries, persimmon, olive, wild pear, citric fruits, apple, plum, apricot and peach abound. The valley is also notable for producing the finest honey in the country. The Swat River, which flows through the centre, is the source of vital water sustaining the fruit orchards and fields in the valley.

The exotic Swat cuisine is traditionally diverse and is influenced by the various



Malam-Jaba-Ski-Resort

communities that have settled in the region. The Swat cuisine consists of Afghan, Iranian and Kashmiri dishes. The food is rich in aroma and flavor and presents a varied banquet of delicacies in vegetarian and non-vegetarian food.

Handicrafts were also a major source of income for the locals. A strong Persian and Afghan influence is reflected in the perfection of the local handicrafts- beautifully patterned finely hand- woven rugs, silk & wool shawls with intricate embroidery, embroidered linen, silverware, tribal jewellery and wood carvings.

Being a land of geographical diversities, Swat is a dream destination for everyone, be it a nature lover or an adventure enthusiast. Swat's exquisiteness never diminishes- as it transforms from the fiery colours of autumn to dazzling white of winter to the imperturbable green of summer. Winter in Swat has its own unique charm with

the snow covered valleys bustling with various activities. Tourists from across the country throng to this arresting valley to enjoy its ample scope for adventurous sports such as trekking, skiing, trout fishing, mountaineering and camping.

Some of the best tourist attractions of Swat are Mingora, Saidu-Sharif, Madyan, Kalam, Bahrin, Kabal, Malam Jaba, Migawara and Miandam. These destinations are strewn with amazing religious and historical places, monuments, palaces and other popular amenities. The region of Swat is mainly divided into two sectors, Upper Swat and lower Swat. The striking feature of this region is the variation in geography, culture, religion and climate in all its different regions. The upper and lower Swat valley is the epitome of scenic beauty and is resplendent with views of beautiful capped mountains. Looming over the fertile valley are many impressive small towns flanked by the Hindukush mountain range. Signature of

Ushud utror Valleys Swat



one of the most celestial lands on Pakistan, the exotic lakes of Swat; Saidgai lake, Kandolo lake, Bishigram lake, Daral lake are the pride of the valley and are one of the most sought sights by the tourists. An inspiration of many poets- these lakes are surrounded with colourful flowers, alpine pastures, and captivating hills. There are also many mythical legends associated with these lakes.

The main towns of Swat Mingora and Saidu Sharif are mercantile centres of Swat and gateway to other tourist municipalities of the region. Towns in upper and lower Swat are renowned for their paradisiacal beauty. In

upper Swat, Kalam is famed for its rare valleys Gabral and Ushu and Buddhist shrines. The views of cultivated lush fields lying like patchwork hundreds of meters below as the trek zigzags through mountainous terrain, makes for an enthralling hike. Other popular upper hill villages are Miandam and Malam Jabal located 7000 ft above sea level, most notable for their walking treks, hikes, skiing, mosques with mystical geometry designs and Sufi shrines. Few miles away from Mingora, yet located on the stunning bank side, Kabal offers a whole host of attractions for golfers and non-golfers alike. The 18 hole golf course is the backdrop for all the activities at Swat.

Venturing towards upper of the Swat river is the cluster of picturesque villages, riverside resorts, such as Bahrin and Madyan that are perfect for riverside holidays, family picnics, fishing and canoeing. The panoramic views of mountains around Madyan and Bahrin give shooting views to the eyes. Bahrin is also a meeting place of two rivers Swat and Daral.

Another place worth to visit in the Swat is the museum located between main towns of Mingora and Sidu Sharif. Swat museum has amassed antiquities, ethnographic and archaeological relics from historical periods dating back to Ghanadara and Buddhist civilization. There are displays that explore the identity of all kinds of indigenous peoples of the valley. The collection in these museums ranges from exquisite pieces of art to artefacts like maps, coins, ancient jewellery, crafted swords and war weapons. A visit to the museums of Swat serves as one of the best windows into the history, traditions, art, and culture of the region.

Prospect of restoring crowning glory of Pakistan

Tourism has become world's most important exporting commodity. Though, in the post 9/11, tourism suffered from New York to Cairo. However, the minor glitch in decline of tourism was brief as these industries made speedy and remarkable recoveries in coming years. In recent times, and due to media exposure, Muslim countries from Arabian Gulf to North Africa to South East Asia have become more sought after tourist destinations. In 2008 World Tourist organization reported that North Africa had become the most popular destination for tourists. Realistically tourism could be viewed the same as any other consumerist corporation, in that its main purpose is to make money. Tourism is essentially an objet d'art that is disseminated for cash and at times represents 10% of total GDP of national economy. Pakistan missed out on a golden opportunity to market its national heritage in

the international sector. Here is an opportunity to create markets for tourism in a densely populated part of the world with countries that are the neighbours. With careful planning, increased security and peace plans, Pakistan can cash in on the abundance of its tourist resources. The successful tourism can attribute to poverty reduction, enhance lively hood, as well as reconstruct local infrastructure. The challenge is to target a substantial part of the income earned through tourism at sustainable schemes such as creating jobs and vocational training programs.

In Swat domestic tourism has always been bigger than international tourism. International tourism can be decisive in providing economic incentives; business development, creating employment and bringing in influx of foreign currency into local market. However, it can also be volatile in reaction to crises and natural disasters. This calls for a carefully planned and balanced development of both national and international markets with an objective of making tourism more sustainable in long term. A strategy that focuses on subsequent flows of tourism and





Mountains of Kalam Valley

involves community based development that teams up with the private and international sector to become an integral part of national tourism. Nonetheless, it is up to Pakistani ministry to decide the extent they wish their culture, society and environment to become a commodity. The tourism development should be monitored and regulated quite frequently.

Swat was a crowning jewel of the Pakistani tourism, but the astute politics have traumatized the tourism throughout the country. In coming years political instability will continue to generate negative publicity,

which has profound impact on the number of tourist arrivals. The government and tourism ministry face arduous task ahead of them. Rebuilding of Swat, restoring the morale of locals and promoting sustainable tourism could take years. The authorities need to come up with a comprehensive scheme to attract tourists back again and more money and resources are in urgent need. Nevertheless, it will be quite some time, before tourism revives in Swat and achieving long term peace also seems like a daunting and strenuous mission.