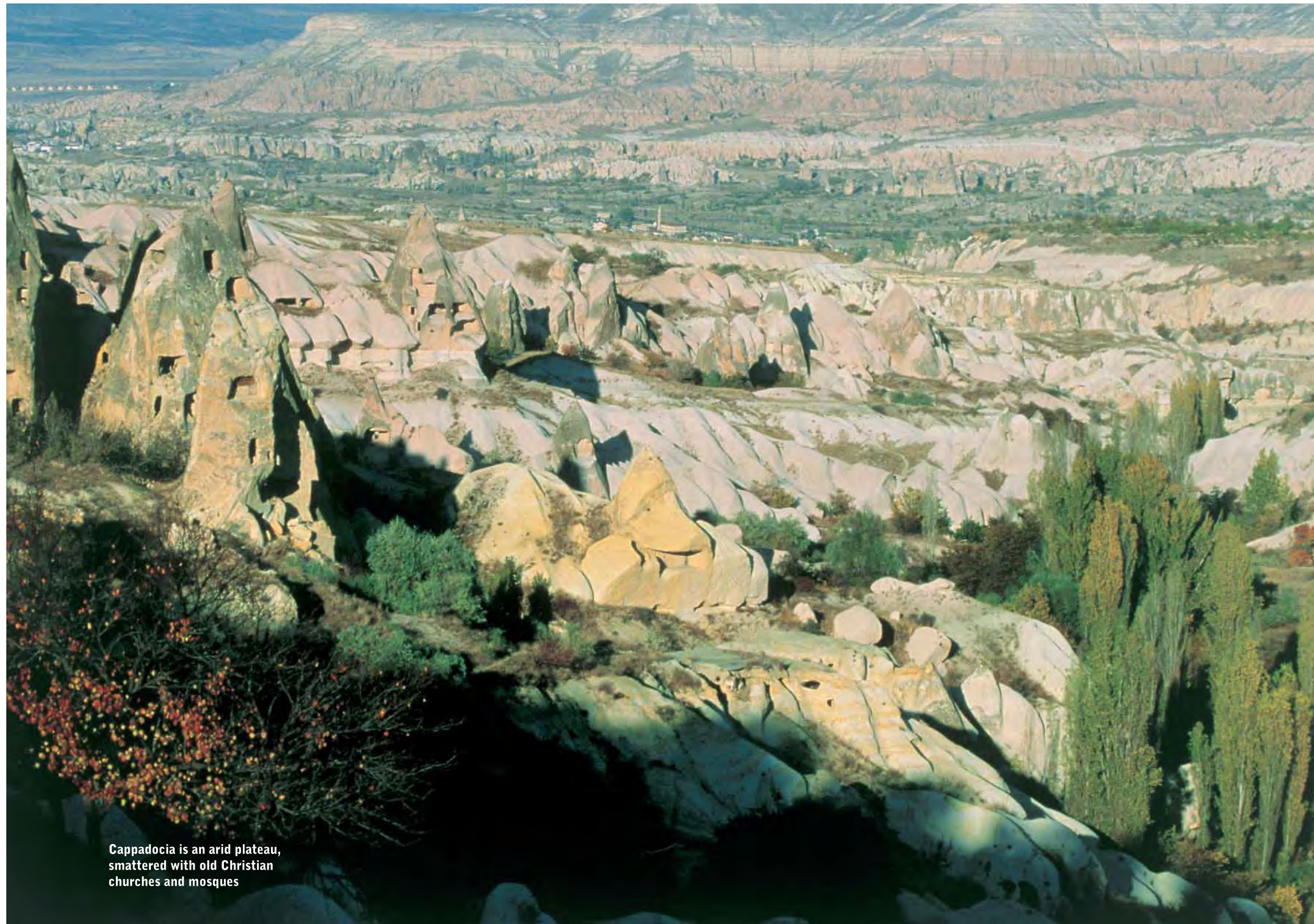


BAZAARS, BAM AND BLACK GOLD

In our last issue three adventurous French lads started their round-the-world trip in a Renault. This time the lads fill their Scenic RX4 with smuggled fuel then dodge bandits and car crashes near the

border of Afghanistan

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Cappadocia is an arid plateau, smattered with old Christian churches and mosques

From Cappadocia, we left central Turkey and headed east. We quickly crossed Erzurum, the capital of Oriental Anatolia, and then the road that lead us east to Iran clashed abruptly with the Caucasus foothills. Snow was everywhere. We were forced to camp in temperatures below -17°C and we crossed the Iranian border under a shroud of white flakes!

After passing through Tehran, we started a journey of more than 2000km through the Persian Oases, on the former silk road which leads to Beijing. Our first goal was to reach Yazd, a town stuck in solitude between two deserts – the Kavir in the north and the Lut in the south. Beyond the borders of the town, as far as our weary eyes could see, sand and

rocks seemed to have seized the horizon. We left the Renault for a spot of sightseeing. We jumped above flat or domed roofs, strode over narrow streets, like tightrope walkers, on wooden beams wedged between two walls. Cracked earth, dried by wind, loaded with salt and heated white-hot by the sun surrounded this outpost. We crossed an amazing bric-a-brac of antennas, grain sacks and red chillies being dried in the sun. Below us, the labyrinth of the bazaar buzzed with the music of horns and whining wheels.

We set off for Kerman, on the edge of the Lut desert. The black stretch of asphalt pushed its way through rocks and sand. At the entrance to the city, a dirt road wormed its way through irrigated fields of the oasis: date palms and pistachio trees – sheltered behind

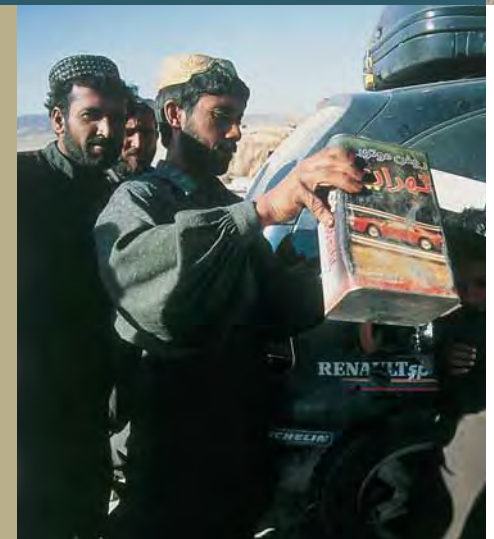
high walls – splashed some welcome green over the yellow sand. At the end of the day, we joined the gaily-coloured crowd of the Vakil Bazaar; a human tide negotiated, bought and sold there. The women who wore the Hedjab, the Islamic chador, skirted around us, without daring to even glance at us. The scent of coriander, cumin, curry and saffron wafted from shop doorways.

Alas, it was back in the RX4 for us – next stop Bam. Bam is a huge fortress made only from desert sand. It has been built on a rocky spur which overlooks the palm fields set up along the base of its walls. From a distance, Bam resembled a sandcastle built on an enormous beach – it was unreal. In spite of perfectly-preserved sand walls, the interior was like that of a ghost town.



> A GUARDED MOMENT

■ We left Bam, in south-eastern Iran, on the one and only road leading to Pakistan, which is very strictly controlled by the Iranian army. We were actually halfway between Pakistan and Afghanistan, where every possible type of trafficking has flourished for decades: arms, drugs, etc. Skirmishes between the army and traffickers are frequent. We did not escape the rules: an army 4X4 escorted us for 300km to the border. We stopped every 30km at a checkpoint, drank tea and our guards were changed. We were amused by these changeovers but soon had the feeling we would need three days to cover the distance to the border; after six hours, we had driven only 60km! At the third checkpoint, thankfully, the soldiers left us to our destiny.





The lads remained wary in the Lut Desert, near Afghanistan – bandits were about. Children enjoy a mud bath (at right) on the banks of the Indus River, Pakistan. In Dereichi, eastern Turkey (bottom right), the travellers take a rest



> ARRIVING IN TEHRAN

■ We rolled down the major roadways of Tehran, dodging as best we could the repeated attacks of its drivers in their Paykans, the popular car in Iran. Iranians were, without a doubt, the maddest drivers we had seen since our trip began: they had a nasty habit of driving in zigzags. Again and again, we sought to protect the wings of the Scenic, swerving beneath the dour looks of the ayatollahs and heroes of the Iran-Iraq war, whose faces were plastered all around the town!



We sped towards Zahedan, the Pakistani border checkpoint. We only needed 30 minutes and everything would be settled: the Pakistani customs officers even stopped a game of chess to stamp our passports! A portrait of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the famous liberator of Pakistan after the Indian partition of 1947, welcomed us under the green and white colours of the flag. The officers spoke English while taking tea in canopy shade. Pictures of Sussex cottages decorated a calendar on the faded wall. Symbols of the long English presence in the region, surreal out there in the desert.

The stretch of asphalt, which slalomed down the centre of these huge desert plains, narrowed quickly to a single lane.

After 30km without passing a single soul suddenly we were in a near-collision: a riotously-coloured Pakistani truck almost smashed into us. A cold realisation gripped us – how stupid we'd been. We had forgotten one small, but crucial, detail: we had to drive on the left side of the road! Another rule: when you passed another vehicle on that lone two-metre wide road the bigger-sized one has priority. Even though the road was paved, our 4X4 deftly yielded to lumbering trucks, exhibiting its off-road skills by pulling out onto sandy shoulders to avoid catastrophe.

The variety of desert landscapes paraded in front of our eyes was incredible: endless arid plateaux covered with prickly bushes, red and rocky peaks and sand dunes as well as small villages we passed through.

However, even though the area seemed safe, we heeded advice from border officials and slept in army camps. The road was apparently far from safe, especially at night. The Afghani border was less than 100km away.

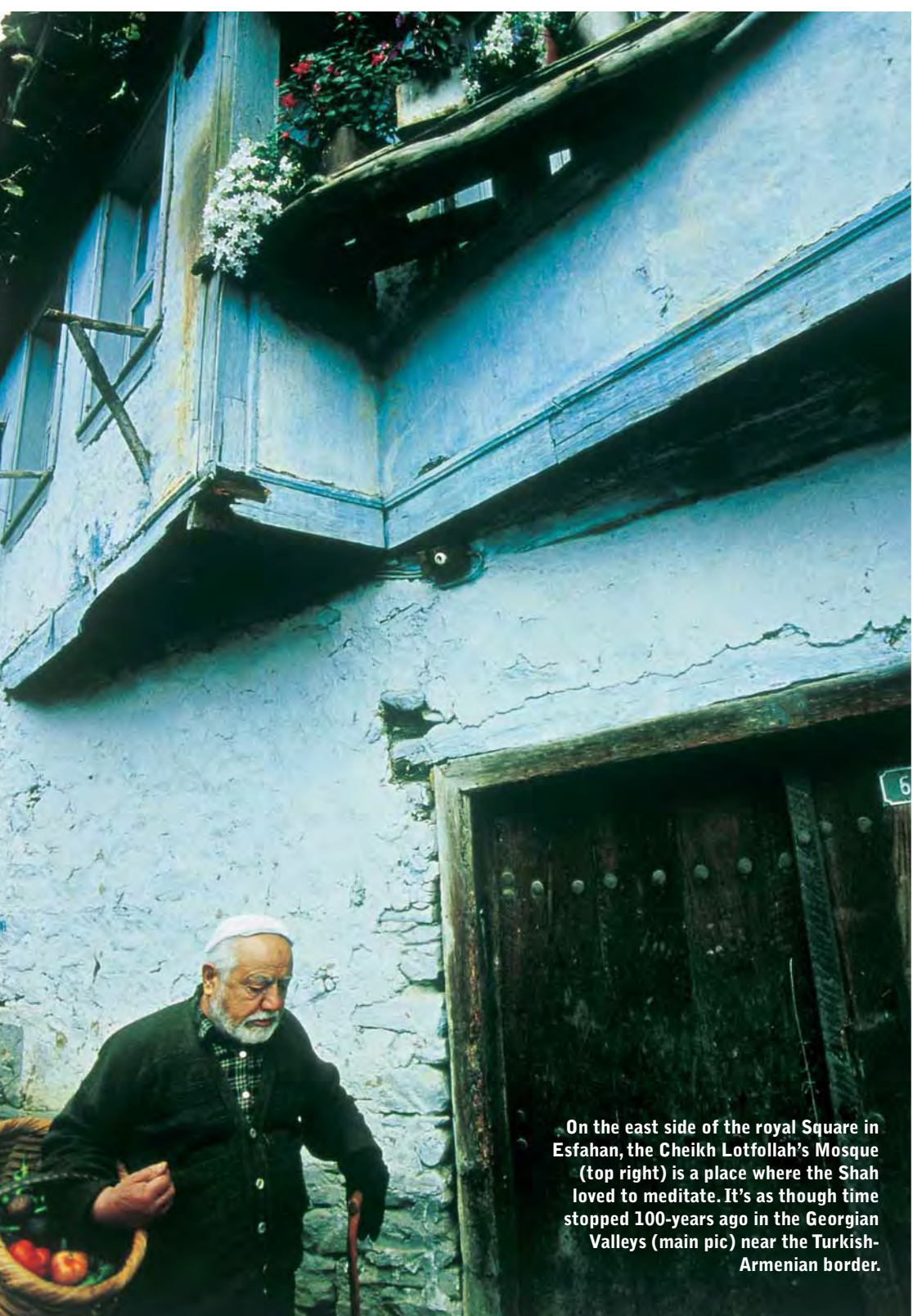
After 500km, the inevitable happened. The Renault's fuel warning light flashed on – and we had not seen a fuel stop anywhere. Once we reached a small town we had to follow local rules, so we bought 20 litres out of a tin. We asked where the gasoline was from and the shopkeeper pointed to the west and said: "Iran". The proximity and unbeatable price of Iranian gas (about 7 cents a litre, versus \$1.80 in Pakistan) had created a lucrative business. Many pick-ups, overflowing with gas tins, constantly went to the border and then returned, day and night.

> WORLDWIDE WEB ACTION

■ Follow the lads' travels via the web.



www.renault.com (search: adventure)



On the east side of the royal Square in Esfahan, the Cheikh Lotfollah's Mosque (top right) is a place where the Shah loved to meditate. It's as though time stopped 100-years ago in the Georgian Valleys (main pic) near the Turkish-Armenian border.



We were suspicious about the quality of the gas and wary about the consequences for our engine, but we had to use this smuggled black gold – we had no alternative. Surrounded by a huge crowd of curious nomads we filled our tank using an awkward combination of a jerry can, funnel and nylon stocking to filter the precious liquid.

Arid is a simple, stark word, perfectly suited to describing the Baluchistan Desert. “Not a drop of rain for five years,” the Baluchi farmers told us as they dug in dry pits, searching for water. Despite this bleakness, these warriors greeted us like kings, serving us tea in their big fortified farmhouses.

From Quetta, at the eastern edge of the desert, we continued on through the high plateaux of Pakistan’s dry heart. The road

quickly became a dirt track that ducked into the suffocating humidity of the Indus Valley.

Once we arrived in Islamabad, the French ambassador invited us to his residence and, surprisingly, he was very interested in our travel tales. This boded well for us because to enter China from here, you had to have a lot of money or be politically connected. The Embassy was willing to help us when we returned, in August, when the Pass would open after winter. In the meantime we decided to visit bewitching India.

We left Islamabad for Delhi with a new dream: return to Pakistan and drive the Khunjerab Pass, magnificent gateway to the Chinese Himalayas! ❌

(Keep reading 4X4 Australia for more tales from the intrepid French trio.)