

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Understanding Pakistan Before Moving There

MILO NOX | PAKISTAN EXPAT GUIDE

1.1 Why Choose Pakistan?

Choosing Pakistan as an expatriation destination is not an obvious decision. That is precisely what can make it an interesting project. The country is not designed to attract foreigners with a uniform promise of comfort, simplicity, or freedom without trade-offs. It requires you to understand places, networks, written rules, and limitations that nobody will always take the time to explain. In return, it offers a cultural depth, human intensity, and territorial diversity that smoother destinations have often sacrificed on the altar of convenience.

Pakistan's first major attraction is its geographical position. The country connects South Asia, Central Asia, China, the Gulf of Oman, and the Persian world. That geography appears in its languages, cuisines, faces, trade routes, and ways of life. Lahore looks toward the history of Punjab and the Mughal heritage. Karachi lives to the rhythm of its port, finance, industry, and internal migration. Islamabad presents itself as orderly, administrative, and diplomatic. Peshawar carries a Pashtun and frontier culture. The North, meanwhile, is not simply a reservoir of landscapes for social media: it is a collection of valleys, communities, and logistical constraints where winter, roads, and local politics can decide your schedule for you.

This variety creates real opportunities for very different profiles. International organizations, NGOs, education, development, energy, telecommunications, engineering, agriculture, textiles, logistics, and digital services can make room for foreign expertise. The technology sector is growing, particularly in the major cities, but growth should not be confused with a market that is open to everyone. Useful expertise, a clear mission, and a strong professional network are worth more than an impressive CV sent from abroad to fifty generic addresses.

Pakistan can also interest entrepreneurs capable of working with a complex market. The population is young, demand is enormous, needs are numerous, and solutions are often incomplete. This creates opportunities in education, healthcare, professional services, digital products, decentralized energy, logistics, and tools for small businesses. But the country does not automatically reward initiative. It rewards initiative that understands power relationships, delays, taxation, regulation, and the need to choose partners whose reliability does not rest solely on a warm handshake.

For a remote worker paid from abroad, the relationship between income and expenses may initially appear attractive. That impression needs to be corrected immediately. Local rents,

meals, ordinary transport, and domestic services can be affordable. On the other hand, residential security, generators or backup batteries, international health insurance, private schools, imported products, frequent travel, and international flights can quickly change the calculation. Pakistan can be affordable for someone who adopts a local lifestyle. It becomes considerably less cheap for someone trying to reproduce a climate-controlled, secure European bubble with everything delivered to the door.

The country also attracts people through the quality of human relationships. Hospitality is not an abstract advertising slogan. It structures relationships, especially once a bond of trust begins to form. People may invite you, help you, introduce you to someone, solve an administrative problem, or organize transportation with a generosity that can seem disproportionate. That warmth nevertheless has its own codes. It often implies reciprocity, respect for family, awareness of status, and social availability. Receiving a great deal does not mean you can remain a passive consumer of local kindness.

Unspoken Rule: In Pakistan, a reliable relationship can open more doors than a week of emails. This does not mean that rules do not matter. It means that rules are implemented by human beings, and human beings prefer to understand who you are before taking a risk on your behalf.

There is also a particular kind of freedom in living in a country that is not entirely organized around the Western gaze. Local debates have their own priorities. Social hierarchies, political tensions, religion, economics, and family shape public space without asking visitors for permission. For some expatriates, this decentering is stimulating. For others, it quickly becomes uncomfortable because they discover that being foreign does not make them the moral center of the room.

Pakistan is therefore not an easy choice. It may suit someone who is willing to prepare carefully, respect more conservative social norms, check risks by region, and build a network without selling themselves to the first intermediary available. It will suit someone less well if they require perfectly transparent administration, a highly liberal public life, absolute individual autonomy, or identical security conditions in every province.

Avoid This: Choosing Pakistan only because the cost of living appears low or because the northern mountains look like a promise of personal rebirth. A country is not a treatment for boredom. It owes you neither a revelation, a miraculous economy, nor a perfectly scripted adventure.

So why choose Pakistan? Because it offers a dense, demanding experience that is difficult to reduce to a cliché. Because serious projects can be built there, deep relationships can be formed, and a region of the world can be understood that is often discussed by people who have never lived there. But that richness is accessible only under one condition: come to learn as much as you come to act.

1.2 What to Expect in Practice

Arriving in Pakistan can create a misleading first impression. At the airport, formalities may seem quick. A driver is waiting, a SIM card is found, and the first meal arrives before you have even figured out where to buy water. Then the real country begins: securing the lease,

negotiating a bank account, clarifying your immigration status, preparing for power cuts, organizing transportation, and sorting through contradictory answers. Everyday life is not necessarily chaotic. It is layered. Every problem has a solution, but rarely a single door through which to reach it.

The first reality is dependence on local context. A procedure that works in Islamabad may unfold differently in Karachi. A bank may accept your application at one branch and reject it at another. One landlord may request reasonable guarantees, while another may demand several months' rent in advance because they assume the foreigner will leave without notice. The rules exist, but their implementation varies according to the city, the sector, the applicant's status, and the competence of the person handling the file.

Survival Tip: Keep both a paper and a digital copy of every important document. Your passport, visa, contract, employer letter, lease, passport photos, proof of income, and local contact details should be accessible without an internet connection. The day the network goes down, the administration does not suspend its love of paperwork.

Housing will be one of your first tests of clear thinking. Property photos often show rooms that are larger, brighter, and newer than reality. Inspect water pressure, the electrical installation, backup systems, internet quality, access during rainy periods, the neighborhood, security arrangements, and the actual distance to work or school. In Karachi and Lahore, a few kilometers can become an hour-long journey. In Islamabad, a quiet sector can be extremely comfortable while still being far from the services you need every day.

Electricity and internet require a continuity strategy. Conditions vary greatly by area and provider. Some buildings or residential developments have generators, batteries, UPS systems, or solar panels. Others let you discover the fragility of the grid at precisely the moment you have a deadline. For a local employee, this is an inconvenience. For a remote worker billing clients abroad, it is a professional risk. A second mobile connection and backup power are not gadgets. They are basic tools.

Banking and payments can also require patience. Digital payments are expanding, local apps are useful, and the major cities allow people to live with less cash than in the past. Yet opening an account as a foreigner may require several documents, physical presence, an employer letter, or additional checks. International transfers are monitored and banks want to understand the source of funds. Arriving with the idea that your European passport will solve everything is a creative way to lose three mornings.

The healthcare system operates at several speeds. Major cities have private clinics and well-regarded hospitals, but quality, cost, and specialist availability vary. For routine care, you may obtain an appointment quickly. For a complex condition, major procedure, or emergency in a remote area, you need to know in advance which facility to use, how to get there, how payment works, and what your insurance covers. In the North or in some rural areas, distance itself becomes a medical factor.

Urban transportation also requires adaptation. Ride-hailing apps make life easier in several major cities, but they do not eliminate traffic jams, aggressive driving, price changes, or location problems. Private cars with drivers remain common among expatriates employed by

organizations, not because everyone dreams of a colonial stage set, but because traffic, security, and logistics make the arrangement practical. It does create a dependency that must be managed properly: clear contracts, working hours, pay, rest periods, and responsibilities.

The climate will alter your rhythm. Heat can be overwhelming in the plains. The monsoon can disrupt roads and services. Winter fog affects parts of Punjab. Air pollution becomes a serious problem in several cities. The North offers cooler temperatures, but roads, landslides, snow, and seasonal closures impose their own limits. Pakistan does not have one climate. It has several systems that sometimes seem to have agreed to take turns testing your organization.

The relationship with time is flexible, but not uniformly so. A private appointment may start late. An international business meeting will usually be more structured. An administration may ask you to come back tomorrow without considering this an incident. A family inviting you to dinner can turn an evening into a five-hour event. Punctuality remains evidence of seriousness, but expecting the same discipline from everyone produces frustration without much return.

Insider Tip: Always confirm on the day itself, then verify the address using a known landmark. An address can be legally correct and practically useless. Cities grow faster than orientation systems because human urban planning retains a pronounced taste for improvisation.

Finally, expect to be observed. In international neighborhoods, your presence may go almost unnoticed. In a secondary city or rural area, it may attract curiosity. Most of the time, that attention will be friendly. It can nevertheless become tiring, especially for a woman traveling alone, a visibly foreign couple, someone heavily tattooed, or anyone whose appearance falls outside local norms. The strategy is neither to hide nor to provoke. It is to read the environment before deciding which version of yourself can move through it without creating unnecessary problems.

In practical terms, living in Pakistan requires backup solutions, verification of every important commitment, and resistance to two extremes: believing that nothing works, or believing that everything will work out because people are warm. Many things work. Some work very well. But the system will not always protect you from your own carelessness, and it does not reimburse trust given to the wrong intermediary.

1.3 Quick Cultural Overview

Understanding Pakistani culture begins by abandoning the idea of a single identity. The country is united around a state, a history, and a Muslim majority, but it remains shaped by different languages, provincial identities, traditions, and collective memories. Urdu serves as the national language and a common symbol. English remains important in administration, higher education, law, and professional environments. In daily life, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Saraiki, and many other languages give the country its real texture.

This plurality explains why a phrase learned in Islamabad will not be enough everywhere. Speaking a few words of Urdu will often produce a positive reaction, but a local language can create a deeper connection. You do not need to become a linguist before buying bread. You do need to understand that language also indicates who belongs to which space, what history

lies behind a joke, and why two people who appear to be discussing the same subject may not be drawing on the same references.

Family is one of the central structures of social life. It is not merely emotional. It organizes mutual support, decisions, marriage, housing, business, reputation, and sometimes employment. An adult may consult parents or elders about choices that a European would consider strictly personal. This does not mean that nobody has autonomy. It means that autonomy is negotiated within a denser network.

Unspoken Rule: When someone introduces you to their family, it is not just a social detail. It is often a sign of trust. Behave as though that trust has value, because it does.

Hospitality is expressed through food, tea, availability, and insistence. Refusing bluntly can be perceived as distance or contempt. Accepting everything without limits, however, will create an impossible social calendar. You need to learn to decline warmly, taste, thank people, and explain yourself. Form matters as much as the decision. A blunt no closes a door. A respectful no leaves the relationship intact.

Religion is visible in the organization of the day, the calendar, greetings, standards of modesty, and public debate. Practice varies enormously. Some families are highly conservative. Others approach religion privately or more flexibly. Major cities contain artistic, academic, and professional circles that are more open, without that openness erasing the broader framework. Avoid two symmetrical mistakes: reducing everyone to religion, or pretending that religion has no social or legal consequences.

During Ramadan, schedules, team energy, invitations, and commercial life change. People who are not fasting should observe the context before eating or drinking publicly. In some environments, this will cause no problem. In others, it may be perceived as an unnecessary provocation. Adapting does not mean converting. It means understanding that individual freedom is never experienced in a vacuum.

Social respectability matters. Clothing, the way you speak, your companions, and your discretion can influence the trust you receive. For a foreign man, clean and understated clothing will often open more doors than an excessively casual style. For a woman, expectations vary according to city, social environment, and activity, but clothing that covers the shoulders and legs generally reduces attention and makes interactions easier. The objective is not to disappear. It is to avoid making clothing the only subject of the encounter.

Relationships between men and women are also contextual. In some offices, universities, and urban neighborhoods, mixed-gender interaction is normal. In other environments, it remains more restricted. A handshake between a man and a woman should not be assumed. Wait for the other person to initiate it. That second of observation prevents awkward scenes that humanity will certainly survive, but your interlocutor may remember longer than necessary.

Communication is often indirect when harmony must be preserved or when contradicting an older, more powerful, or honored person would create friction. A verbal agreement may signal positive intent rather than a final commitment. The word yes can mean “I heard you,” “I will try,” or “I do not want to disappoint you right now.” For professional decisions, request

written confirmation, dates, and responsibilities. You are not being distrustful. You are simply preventing politeness from becoming an imaginary contract.

Status matters. Academic titles, profession, family, age, and institutional position influence how a person is received. This hierarchy can seem heavy, but it does not prevent humor or closeness. Pakistani relationships can move quickly from formal to intimate. A colleague who called you “sir” in the morning may tell you about their family in the evening. Do not confuse that closeness with the abolition of boundaries. Some confidences are signs of trust, not permission to comment on everything.

Food is a social language. It varies by region, class, and season. Meals can be generous, spicy, and late. The insistence that you take another serving is part of the ritual. Allergies, dietary restrictions, or preferences should be explained clearly because “I do not eat much” may be interpreted as an invitation to serve you more. Vegetarians can eat very well, but should check broths, fats, and preparation methods. Severe allergies require simple, visible explanations.

Avoid This: Constantly comparing Pakistan with India, the Gulf, or your home country. Comparisons can help you understand. Used as verdicts, they quickly become arrogant. Pakistan is not experienced as an incomplete version of somewhere else.

Integration ultimately depends on consistency. Returning to the same café, greeting the guard, learning names, accepting an invitation, asking about a sick relative, and keeping your promises create a social place for you. Relationships are not built only through instant affinity. They are built through presence. In a country where institutions can be uneven, human memory remains a major piece of infrastructure.

1.4 Political Environment and Freedoms

Pakistan is formally a federal parliamentary republic with a constitution, elections, assemblies, courts, and provincial governments. That architecture genuinely exists. It is not enough, however, to describe how power operates. Political life is marked by the lasting influence of the military, rivalries between parties, judicial power struggles, street mobilization, and strong polarization. For an expatriate, the point is not to become a constitutional expert in three weeks. It is to understand that apparent institutional stability can coexist with rapid changes in the political climate.

Elections are competitive, political parties have popular bases, and debates are intense. Yet access to power, media coverage, arrests, communication restrictions, and administrative decisions can be influenced by actors beyond the parliamentary framework. A private political discussion with friends does not carry the same weight as a public post, participation in a demonstration, or professional activity connected to the media.

Unspoken Rule: As a foreigner, observe more than you declare. You do not need a public opinion about every local crisis. The world will survive your silence, an achievement rarely attempted on the internet.

Freedom of expression exists, but it encounters legal, political, religious, and security-related limits. Journalists, activists, opposition figures, and civil-society organizations may face

pressure. Digital platforms and communication services can be slowed, blocked, or monitored during sensitive periods. Disruptions do not affect activists alone. They can interrupt a payment, a meeting, a journey, or family contact. For a remote worker, national politics can therefore enter the living room in the very concrete form of a connection that disappears.

Religion is an especially sensitive area. Blasphemy-related laws and accusations can have extremely serious consequences. Do not joke about religious figures, share provocative content, debate casually, or assume that a private conversation will remain private. Prudence does not mean living in fear. It means recognizing that certain subjects carry legal and social risks very different from those found in Western Europe.

Photography and video also require judgment. Military installations, checkpoints, official buildings, certain infrastructure, demonstrations, and security operations should not be filmed without authorization. A phone taken out in the wrong place can trigger a lengthy inspection, even if your intentions were completely innocent. Innocence is not a file format that an officer can open immediately.

Demonstrations can be large and can change rapidly. They can cause roadblocks, closures, checks, transport disruptions, and sometimes clashes. Avoid political gatherings, monitor local information, and keep flexibility in your movements. In Islamabad, access to certain areas may be filtered. In Lahore, Karachi, or Peshawar, a mobilization can turn major routes into dead ends. In a country where roads structure everyday life, a political event quickly becomes a logistical problem.

Individual freedoms also vary according to the subject. Religious minorities are protected in principle, but minority communities may face discrimination, violence, or obstacles. Women participate in professional, political, and academic life, but gaps in safety, mobility, and autonomy remain significant depending on the environment. LGBT+ people operate in a highly restrictive legal and social environment and must carefully assess visibility, relationships, and digital security.

For an expatriate, risk depends on the profile. A corporate executive living in a secure neighborhood, a researcher working with a university, an independent journalist, a humanitarian worker, or a politically engaged person will not face the same level of exposure. General recommendations must be supplemented by an analysis of the profession, city, travel patterns, and subjects involved.

The presence of the military and security services can be surprising. It is visible in some places and discreet in others, but its role extends beyond defense alone. Checks should be handled calmly, with documents accessible and answers simple. Publicly challenging an officer's authority to defend an abstract principle is rarely an effective strategy. Ask for an explanation, contact your organization or local contact if necessary, and avoid theatrical escalation. The scene will be less memorable, which is exactly the objective.

Insider Tip: Separate your digital uses. A clean phone for sensitive professional travel, regular backups, two-factor authentication, and emergency contacts stored offline reduce risk. This is not about playing spy. It is about accepting that a lost, inspected, or blocked device can contain your entire administrative life.

Finally, resist two lazy narratives. The first portrays Pakistan as a lawless state where only force matters. The second presents its institutions as perfectly comparable to those of a stable European democracy. Reality lies in the interaction between law, informal power, popular mobilization, the military, the judiciary, media, and social networks. To live there, you do not need to solve this equation. You simply need to avoid behaving as though it does not exist.

1.5 Internal Divisions and Tensions

Pakistan is divided by more than rich and poor, urban and rural, or conservative and progressive. Its fault lines overlap: province, language, class, religion, gender, generation, access to water, employment, education, security, and proximity to power. An expatriate can live for a long time in a privileged neighborhood without seeing these tensions except through the news. They nevertheless exist in traffic, housing prices, checks, professional relationships, and the silences of people who work for them.

The most visible divide is economic. A minority of urban residents live in gated neighborhoods, attend private schools, travel, speak English, and have access to the best healthcare. A few kilometers away, families may depend on daily income, fragile housing, and intermittent public services. A foreigner paid in a strong currency can immediately be associated with the first world, even when they consider themselves modest. That perception affects prices, requests for help, relationships with staff, and the way your words are received.

Avoid This: Turning every relationship with a poorer person into a survival negotiation. Check prices, set boundaries, and protect yourself from abuse, but do not treat everyone as a potential scammer. Total distrust produces exactly the cold, opportunistic relationship you claim you wanted to avoid.

Provincial differences are profound. Punjab concentrates population, administrative power, agriculture, industry, and political influence. Sindh combines Karachi's economic power, rural dynamics, and a distinct cultural identity. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa carries the effects of decades of border conflict, displacement, and militarization. Balochistan, vast and less densely populated, faces political tensions, resource-related claims, and security risks that rule out a casual tourist approach. Gilgit-Baltistan and the northern territories have their own languages, communities, governance issues, and dependence on vulnerable infrastructure.

These differences are not folklore. They influence how people perceive the state, the military, other provinces, and foreigners. A political joke repeated from one city to another can change meaning. An opinion about centralization, resources, or security can touch a family history. Listen before reaching conclusions. The country already has enough fast commentators; it does not need another expert trained during the drive from the airport.

Religious and sectarian tensions must also be recognized. The Muslim majority is not homogeneous. Different traditions, schools, communities, and sensitivities coexist. Religious minorities participate in national life but may face discrimination and violence. For an expatriate, the rule is simple: do not turn curiosity into interrogation, do not ask someone to defend their entire community, and do not repeat rumors connected to religion.

The gender divide is equally variable. Women run businesses, teach, provide healthcare, campaign, and hold public positions. Others face strong restrictions on mobility, work, education, or family choices. City, social class, family, and profession significantly change the experience. A female expatriate may benefit from privileges associated with foreign status while simultaneously facing attention and constraints that her male colleague will never see. Security advice therefore needs to be adapted rather than distributed as universal morality.

Young people represent another fault line. A large share of the population is young, connected, ambitious, and facing a labor market that cannot absorb all their expectations. Graduates may master English, digital tools, and global codes while still depending on family networks and limited opportunities. This combination produces entrepreneurial energy, frustration, emigration, and strong political engagement. For a foreign employer, it provides talent. It also creates an obligation not to exploit low wages simply because “that is the market.”

Urban differences can be brutal. Islamabad is often perceived as calmer, greener, and more organized, but that organization rests partly on social and geographical selection. Neighboring Rawalpindi operates at a denser, more popular pace. Lahore offers remarkable cultural life but suffers from traffic, pollution, and visible inequality. Karachi generates enormous wealth while imposing daily fatigue through distance, uneven infrastructure, security concerns, and competition. Living in one of these cities does not automatically prepare you to live in another.

Climate can intensify some of these divisions. Flooding, heat, pollution, water shortages, and energy fragility affect those with the fewest protections first. An expatriate can buy a battery, filter, generator, vehicle, and insurance. Many neighbors cannot. Understanding this asymmetry helps avoid simplistic judgments about “poor organization” or “lack of planning.” Poverty often looks like poor planning from inside a house equipped with backup systems.

Unspoken Rule: Your comfort may depend on a system that transfers inconvenience onto someone else. Drivers, guards, domestic workers, delivery workers, and administrative employees absorb part of the chaos so that your day appears smooth. Paying them properly, clarifying schedules, and respecting their dignity is not generosity. It is the minimum required if you do not want to reproduce the hierarchy you claim to observe with such lucidity.

Finally, security-related tensions should not be generalized. Some regions and routes carry high risks, while others offer relatively stable daily life. Official advisories distinguish between zones, borders, and periods. Consult them, cross-check them with local information, and accept that an itinerary may need to be changed or cancelled. Courage is not crossing a restricted area to obtain a rare photograph. It is turning back when conditions do not allow you to protect the people traveling with you.

Understanding internal divisions does not mean living in fear. On the contrary, it helps prevent naivety and contempt. Pakistan functions despite its tensions, often through family, professional, and local solidarities that official indicators do not fully capture. But those solidarities should not become an excuse for inadequate services or injustice. They simply show how people maintain daily life when institutions are not enough.

You do not have to choose between fascination and condemnation. You can appreciate the country, respect its people, and remain lucid about its power relationships. That position is less spectacular than an adventure story or a moral verdict. It is also far more useful for living there.