

## Dak Bungalow

My fellow traveler and I are sitting on a platform above the cab of a produce truck racing south on a potholed road at 65 km/hr, getting bugs in our teeth. The floor of the platform is made of tin sheets, and the seams have buckled and become ragged over the years. When the truck swerves around a bend, or the driver slams on his brakes to spare a goat's life, we correspondingly slip and slide over the jagged portions. My corduroy jeans are torn to shreds, and there is even a bit of blood. We cling like limpets to the ornately carved and garishly painted wooden sides, grinning like maniacs, stoned out of our gourds. We each swallowed a thumbnail-sized lump of hash at the truck depot in Quetta that morning.

Halfway to Karachi is the driver's turn-off, and he drops us off on the main road in late afternoon. Pakistan is positively lush after Afghanistan's bleak horizons, warm and tropical, and I am entranced. A crowd of young people swiftly gathers out of nowhere to have a gander at the two less-than-impeccably attired young foreigners. I'm sure the whites of my eyes are blazing blood-red, but no-one seems to mind.

A multitude of questions: "Hallo!" "Where are you coming?" "What is your name?" "What are you doing?" "How are you?"

And then the elders arrive.

"You will stay tonight," one says, brooking no objections. "You will be our guests." He aims his beard at the others and states solemnly, "At the Dak bungalow."

Dak bungalows are a relic of the old British-ruled days, a network of way stations for agricultural inspectors and the like as they traveled through the hinterland. Ours is at the edge of the village, set on a slight rise overlooking manicured grounds replete with trees and shrubs and hedges and flowers.

Mettalic green and raucous, parrots chortle in fruited trees and geckos whistle shrill mating calls. My sandal-clad feet send yellow tufts of dust into orbit around my knees. Dusk drifts in on the backs of wide-winged moths as the villager elders escort us to the glorious Dak bungalow.

Screened-in verandahs, private ensuite bedrooms with ceiling fans, and a caretaker couple who immediately begin preparing an extraordinary meal after plying us with fresh, chilled lime juice.

We bathe, we eat, we cannot believe the generosity of the people in this out of the way village. We celebrate with a chulum after the caretakers have retired to their own quarters down the hill.

"I'm not a hippy, by the way," my Canadian friend says. "I'm really more of a hobo." It sounds like the distinction is important to him.

I don't know what I am. I only know that it's 1968, and I am in a Dak bungalow halfway between Quetta and Karachi. It's not so much the foreign breeze, or sounds not understood. It's more the scent I think my fingers feel on sandalwood...