



SHANDUR POLO FESTIVAL

The Game at the Roof of the World

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CHAPTER 1: THE ORIGINS OF POLO IN NORTHERN PAKISTAN

Polo is an ancient sport, believed to have been played for over 2,500 years. The origins of polo in Northern Pakistan, especially in Chitral and Gilgit, date back centuries, with the game becoming an integral part of the local culture. Polo was brought to this region through ancient trade routes and military conquests. The rugged terrains and mountainous geography of this region played a key role in shaping the sport into its current form.

Unlike modern polo, the version played in Northern Pakistan is known as "freestyle polo" or "traditional polo", a more raw and thrilling version of the game.

It is said that the game was introduced by local rulers who viewed polo as a way to showcase their strength, horsemanship, and military prowess. The people of Chitral and Gilgit have embraced the sport for generations, making it a crucial part of their cultural identity. The Shandur Polo Festival is a tribute to this enduring relationship between the people and the sport.



CHAPTER 2: SHANDUR PASS – THE HIGHEST POLO GROUND IN THE WORLD

Shandur Pass is located at an astonishing altitude of 3,700 meters (12,139 feet) above sea level, making it the highest polo ground in the world. It lies on the boundary between Chitral in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan, two regions known for their rich cultural heritage and stunning landscapes.

The Shandur Polo Ground is a breathtaking sight. The vast, green plateau is surrounded by towering snow-capped mountains, making it an ideal location for the festival. The natural beauty of the area, combined with the spirit of competition, creates an atmosphere that is truly unmatched.

The ground was first leveled for polo during the early 20th century, and since then, it has become the home of the most anticipated polo event of the year.

Visitors often describe the experience as surreal—watching intense polo matches with the backdrop of some of the most majestic landscapes on Earth.



CHAPTER 3: THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SHANDUR POLO FESTIVAL

The Shandur Polo Festival is not just a sporting event; it's a cultural celebration that brings together people from all over the region, and increasingly, from around the world. The festival symbolizes the historical rivalry between the people of Chitral and Gilgit, as their polo teams face off in a battle of honor, skill, and pride. The festival is deeply rooted in the local traditions of the Khow and Kalasha people of Chitral, and the Shina people of Gilgit-Baltistan. Polo has been played in these regions for centuries, and the Shandur Festival is a continuation of that legacy. The festival fosters a sense of unity, showcasing the shared cultural heritage of these mountain communities.

Polo in Shandur is seen as a game for the brave and the fearless. The players, many of whom come from generations of polo players, compete without helmets or modern protective gear. The matches are fast-paced, rough, and unpredictable, reflecting the rugged nature of the surrounding mountains and the people who call them home.



CHAPTER 4: THE TEAMS AND THE RULES OF TRADITIONAL POLO

The Chitral and Gilgit teams are the two main participants in the Shandur Polo Festival. Each team consists of six players, and unlike the more regulated version of polo played internationally, traditional polo in Shandur has fewer restrictions. There are no goalposts, and the field can stretch across several hundred meters, adding to the wild and untamed nature of the game.

The rules of traditional polo are simple: the objective is to score by driving the ball through the opposing team's side, and the team with the most goals at the end of the match wins. The matches are known for their high intensity and rough play. Players and horses alike push themselves to the limits, demonstrating remarkable skill, speed, and endurance.

The relationship between the polo players and their horses is of utmost importance. The horses, bred for agility and strength, are specially trained for the conditions at Shandur. Many of the horses are passed down from one generation to the next, becoming part of the family legacy.



CHAPTER 5: THE EVENT – THREE DAYS OF THRILLING POLO AND CELEBRATION

The Shandur Polo Festival is a three-day event held annually, usually in July. The festival starts with an opening ceremony that showcases the local culture, followed by several matches leading up to the final match on the third day. The festival is not just about polo; it's a carnival of festivities, where tourists, locals, and dignitaries gather to witness the spectacle.

During the festival, the air is filled with the sounds of traditional drums and flutes, adding to the excitement of the matches. The crowds, often numbering in the thousands, cheer passionately for their teams, creating an electrifying atmosphere.

The final day is the most anticipated, where Chitral and Gilgit face off in a highly charged match. The rivalry between these two regions goes back generations, and the final match is often seen as a matter of regional pride. The victor takes home the Shandur Polo Cup, a symbol of supremacy in the world of freestyle polo.



CHAPTER 6: LOCAL MUSIC, DANCE, AND CRAFTSMANSHIP – THE FESTIVITIES AROUND THE POLO FIELD

The Shandur Polo Festival is not just about polo; it's also a celebration of the rich culture of the local communities. In addition to the matches, the festival features music performances, traditional dances, and exhibitions of local craftsmanship.

One of the highlights of the festival is the Chitrali and Gilgit-Baltistani music performances. Traditional rubab, drums, and flutes fill the air, with dancers performing the Chitrali dance and the Dumyal dance, both of which are deeply rooted in the region's history.

The festival also provides a platform for local artisans to showcase their craftsmanship. From handwoven shawls to intricately carved wooden items, the stalls around the festival are a treasure trove of local artistry.

Visitors have the opportunity to purchase unique souvenirs and learn about the traditional skills that have been passed down through generations.



CHAPTER 7: THE ROLE OF SHANDUR POLO FESTIVAL IN PROMOTING TOURISM AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE

The Shandur Polo Festival has played a key role in promoting tourism in Northern Pakistan. With its breathtaking landscapes and vibrant culture, the festival attracts thousands of visitors, both domestic and international, each year. For many tourists, the journey to Shandur Pass is as much an adventure as the festival itself, with the challenging roads and high-altitude terrain offering a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

The festival also serves as an important platform for cultural exchange. Visitors from around the world get a chance to interact with the local communities, learning about their traditions, way of life, and hospitality. The festival is a symbol of peace, unity, and the shared love of polo between the people of Chitral and Gilgit-Baltistan.

In recent years, the Pakistani government has recognized the potential of the Shandur Polo Festival to boost the country's tourism industry. Efforts have been made to improve infrastructure and facilities for tourists, ensuring that more people can experience this unique event.



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