



Are These the Most Dangerous School Runs in the World?

What is your daily school run like? Did you get to school this morning by car, bus or walking? For most of us, the route to school or work is relatively simple and safe. We may not realise it, when we are stuck in traffic three miles from school and know the bell is about to go, but we are the lucky ones. For hundreds of thousands of children in remote areas around the world, the school run is no easy feat. It can mean a life-threatening climb down 1000 foot cliffs, crossing a scorching desert landscape or taking an 800 metre long steel cable zip line ride 400 metres over a river. Join me as we look at some of the most dangerous school runs in the world.

Scaling Mountains

China is a massive country and many parts of the nation are still remote, with little connection to the outside world. While the nation prides itself on its policy of free education for all, this education is not always easy to come by.

For students in the remote Pamir mountain region that separates China from Tajikistan and Afghanistan the nearest school is 120 miles away. For 50 miles of the journey there was no passable road for vehicles for years and so the journey had to be made on foot or by camel.

Four times a year after winter and summer breaks teachers would escort around 80 children from the village on a two day, one night trek to get to the Taxkorgan Town Boarding School where they lived during term time. The school run involved scaling 1000 foot cliffs and walking on a path a few inches wide, cut into the cliff face. There were four freezing rivers to wade across and a 600 foot long zip line. The journey was so arduous that students set off back to school a full week before their town peers considered returning from their break. The construction of a road in 2013 finally made the area more accessible and the school run less deadly.

A Different Kind of School Bus!

In North America the yellow school bus is a ubiquitous sign of school days, but for many children around the world school transport comes in a very different package.

Canoeing or using an inflated tyre or homemade raft are just some of the ways children in Indonesia cross dangerous flooded rivers.

Canoeing is also a popular option in flooded areas in Kenya but here students run the risk of being overturned by hippos or crocodiles!

Children in Argentina and Chile might travel to school by mule while in other areas camels (Western China) and bulls (Myanmar) are more useful.

In Atuler village in Sichuan province in south western China another set of children scale a sheer rock face on a series of vine ladders to make the 800 m long descent into the valley for school. The journey is so dangerous that the villagers have the children make it only twice a month with them staying at the Le'er Primary School for two week stretches in between.

The village, which sits on the top of the mountain, was once connected to the valley by a safer cable style transportation method but the 72 local families (who mostly live on less than \$1 (70p) a day) couldn't afford the electrical and maintenance costs and so all villagers are now left with the precarious vine ladder route. Following a series of photographs and articles by a prominent photographer, the government has now promised to find a solution to the dangerous remoteness of Atuler's villagers.

A Long, Hot Walk to School

In the Thar Desert in India temperatures can reach 50 degrees Celsius in summer. For pupils from some villages, the walk to school can be a one and a half hour trek across this wasteland. Students must rise early to collect water and bathe before setting off at 7 am in order to do the journey before the temperature rises. The heat is still sometimes so intense that feet burn in the sand and noses bleed from the furnace-like conditions. Since there's no electricity in the home villages, students stay at school for one or two hours after classes end in order to complete homework before making the same long trek back home again.



Much of Papua New Guinea is incredibly remote so, for many students there, the trek to school can be up to three hours every day. Students in the Philippines can also endure two hour walks through streams and sugarcane fields on their way to school.

In Aye Aye, Myanmar, the walk itself is only thirty minutes or so before a one and a half hour boat journey. The problem is that the half hour walk is on a village track that becomes a muddy mess in the monsoon season. Students can be knee deep in mud at times.

War Zones

Since the war in Syria began in 2011, authorities believe there have been more than 4000 attacks on schools in Syria and that more than 10000 pupils have died while trying to get to school.

Dangers of a Different Kind

While most of the dangers discussed in this article are natural, many children in areas of Africa face a different challenge on their daily journeys to school.

In areas of Cape Town, South Africa crime is rife and many students have reportedly been attacked by armed gangs on their way to and from school.

Kidnapping school-aged children has been seen as a way to build up the ranks of many rebel armies in West and Sub-Saharan Africa. Many school boys are kidnapped on their way to or from school while, in 2015, hundreds of boys were captured in schools in South Sudan as they were preparing for their exams. These pupils were then forced into the armies of the various factions fighting there.

Making Change Happen

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, written in 1948 contains a specific clause about everyone on earth having the right to an education. This is because education (particularly that of girls) is seen as an integral stepping stone in developing nations becoming more prosperous. The more a country's citizens are educated, the more chance the country and its people have of rising above poverty.

The Declaration is a non-legally binding instrument, meaning that states don't have to follow it, but it has huge political and moral force and encourages countries around the world to adopt appropriate policies for their citizens.

While many nations may offer education to all citizens in the theoretical sense, the opportunities for many from remote and impoverished areas are limited. The passion and determination that some students

and their families show in trekking frozen, baking, flooded or mountainous miles to get to school is a testament to how important education is to everyone around the world. Despite this determination, it is estimated that over 26.3 million school aged children in Asia and the Pacific are still not in school.

So next time you're stuck in traffic on the way to school, consider the other ways you might be taking the school run if you lived elsewhere in the world.

Frozen Wasteland

Perhaps the most dangerous school run in the world is that taken across the Zaskar River in the Himalayas.

While the river is frozen, parents and children risk the 100 km trek across it to their boarding school, facing the perils of melting ice, avalanches and death from exposure and hypothermia.

The amazing journey has been documented on the BBC's **Human Planet** series.

