

# 5 reasons Abbottabad was a great hideout

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By **Maryam Khan Ansari**, Special to CNN

Over the past week, I've heard many commentators assume that bin Laden's mansion in Abbottabad must have stuck out like a sore thumb. But I can tell you from frequent visits to the city and from extended conversations with family and friends in Abbottabad that this is not the case. Here are 5 reasons why:

**1. Large, walled compounds are fairly common:** While it is said that bin Laden's compound was the largest in its vicinity, Abbottabad is still a city known for having many large compounds. Barbed wire on the outside walls is not uncommon, either. Barbed wire and embedded glass shards are found on the tops of outside walls to deter potential burglars. And in Abbottabad, burglary is a more common concern than fugitive terrorists.

In addition, many people have arrived from Swat Valley since the 2005 earthquake and the recent Taliban invasion. People from Swat tend to live in large, walled compounds with many families under one roof. Swat refugees tend to be religiously conservative and these walls allow women in the family to walk outside unveiled without being seen by strangers.

Another reason for the relative abundance of large compounds is that Abbottabad is as a retirement town where wealthy outsiders build their vacation homes to escape the blistering summer heat of other parts of Pakistan.

**2. Abbottabadis are used to many outsiders:** Abbottabad has a history as a medical safe haven. Tuberculosis patients once came to Abbottabad for medical care. It has become a place of rest and relaxation for the old and ailing as well.

So there is a great mix of people in Abbottabad – Swat migrants, rich retirees, and people seeking medical care.

Neighbors don't always know each other and people don't ask too many questions of newcomers – partly out of fear that they may just ask a question that is too intrusive and partly to leave the retired and ailing to their peace.

**3. The drug trade leads people to ask fewer questions of otherwise "eccentric" people.** With rampant marijuana growing in the region, the drug trade hangs over Abbottabad. If people see a particularly large compound, they might assume it was built by black money. This is another reason people don't dwell on abnormally large buildings, and certainly don't try to explore them.

**4. The unpretentious attitudes of the people:** Abbottabad is a place where you don't show off and you don't act impressed by another's wealth. It's just not considered culturally appropriate. There are many wealthy people in Abbottabad. In the case of a three-story mansion, it's likely that people wouldn't give it much attention, even if they noticed it and even if it was (as reports say) eight times the size of neighboring homes. It would be considered crass to talk about it.

**5. The military's presence.** Much has been made of the fact that Abbottabad houses the Pakistan Military Academy (PMA) Kakul, which is Pakistan's version of West Point. But PMA is essentially a gated village where the military officers live and train. Retired Brigadier Mohammad Sadiq, a high-ranking army surgeon once based in the academy says, "PMA Kakul is a village of its own, with its own shops and its own social circles. People don't venture out and nobody ventures in. They don't care about what goes on outside their gates."

While many questions remain as to the military's involvement in hiding Osama bin Laden, it's very likely that the average military Joe didn't even notice that the building existed. True, they live nearby. But the military members rarely leave their base and the bin Laden compound was not in direct sight of the main road leading in and out of the PMA Kakul military areas.

In addition, the military's presence protected the privacy of the compound. Nobody expected the world's most wanted man to be living near a military base. And if the prospect of the compound being a drug lord's house wasn't enough, the average citizen may instead have assumed it was an army building.

Those are all the reasons picking Abbottabad was a smart strategic move. But bin Laden might have had personal motives too. Why endure the extreme weather of the rugged Afghani border areas when you could live in the "San Francisco" of Pakistan? Abbottabad has the rolling green hills, romantic fog and fresh air. And now, thankfully, it no longer has Osama bin Laden.

*The views expressed in this article are solely those of Maryam Khan Ansari.*