



Insanely friendly people

(Part 9)

From Sanandaj, we set out on a long drive to Tahkt-e-Suleiman, or Solomon's Throne, one of the highlights of northern Iran. The centre of Zoroastrian faith, it actually has nothing to do with Solomon. During the Arab invasion, the Zoroastrians saved it from imminent demise by saying that Solomon had stayed there at one point - knowing that the Arabs would not destroy anything with a link to the Qu-ran. Nice work, Zoroastrians! Tahkt-e-Suleiman is beautiful. You might laugh, but it reminded me of Scotland.

In the centre of the temple complex is an aqua blue lake that would have fed the temple aquifers. It is surrounded in mystical, barren mountains and rolling hills of tall grass and reeds. The sky was very atmospheric when we arrived - the sun was partially obscured by clouds, creating a very supernatural hue. It's pretty high in altitude, too, according to my trusted water bottle test that we developed years ago, in Peru; when you go up in altitude, a half full water bottle will become concave as the edges are sucked in. After descending, you screw off the lid and you should hear a long fizzing sound of the air pressure changing. Wow, that was abysmally unscientific, but for someone who has not studied science since grade 10, that's as good as it gets.

We carried on to Zanjan for the night and got up in the morning to visit another Kurdish museum, which was an old laundry house. I have not mentioned it before, but Iran really seems to have an obsession with wax figures.

Michael and I find it down right creepy. We have come to prepare ourselves that whenever you enter a 'museum' you will find life sized wax figurines with very disturbing features. Andrew believes they are cast-offs from Madame Toussauds; "hhmmmm, this one looks too sadistic to be in our collection, let's send it to one of those little museums in Iran." Some of them are so hauntingly creepy that Michael runs away in terror, insisting the wax people will revisit him in his dreams. But Iranians love them. Everywhere you go, they gather 'round the wax figures and take a plethora of photos.

I have spent the better part of the night on the phone with mom, back and forth. We heard the other night that Lufthansa was on strike. We are due to depart tomorrow from Tehran, and after four days of trying to find out information with little to no help from our fearless leader, Pezhman (if it's not a mosque or historical site, he seems pretty disinterested in helping), we finally called Canada. Our travel agent had already confirmed the cancellation of our flight, but we have been unable to get anyone at the Lufthansa office in Tehran.



Tahkt-e-Suleiman

When I tried to call the Lufthansa office in Toronto, it was a 1-800 number and thus would not work from Iran.

I called their marketing department because it was a 416 number, and the woman on the phone was rude and useless. She was yelling and saying "Ma'am, why haven't you gone to the airport?" to which I replied, "Because I am in Kurdistan, 800 km away from Tehran, in the mountains, on the Iraqi border (okay, not exactly, but you throw that in for effect; it sounds good). I closed the conversation and hung up.

In the end, who saved the day but mom? She called the toll free Lufthansa number in Toronto for us. It was tense for a while, as it looked like they weren't going to get us out of there until August 12 - ten days from now - and we don't have enough money to last that long (Iran does not take foreign credit cards or bank cards; it's a cash only destination for foreigners). Then they were going to get us out on the 7th via Russian Aeroflot, which I vow not to fly. But alas, we are booked on an Emirates flight on the 5th, to Dubai then Frankfurt then home to Toronto on Lufthansa. Thanks mom! It remains to be answered as to why two Lufthansa offices, a travel agency in Toronto, a local travel agency in Tehran and a tour guide could not help me, but my mom, in Mississauga could?

Our extended four days in Tehran were fantastic. Courtesy of the Lufthansa strike, we had our hotel and meals paid for. But what really made it fantastic was the warm hospitality we experienced. My friend from work is married to an Iranian man. He gave us the contact number for his brother in Tehran, telling us to call him for help with buying a carpet. What we thought would be a quick shopping trip to look at rugs turned out to be a three day extravaganza in to the wonderful world of Iranian hospitality. The family took us shopping, out to meals, hiking in the Alborz mountains, and had us over for coffees, ice cream, and dinner.

My stomach still hurts (delightfully) as I hear them telling us to "eat more" (eat more fruit, eat more pistachios, eat more ice cream, eat more kebab, eat more cookies, eat more cake, eat more omelette, eat more watermelon...) I don't know how we can ever repay their kindness and hospitality. It made being stranded in a toxically hot city for 4 days so wonderfully bearable!

(Source: Tourists' personal blog)

Sightseeing and excursions in Iran



Naqsh-e Rostam, an archaeological site located about 12 km northwest of Persepolis in Fars province.

Compiled by our staff writers

Iran with attractive natural and historical sites is rated among the 10 most touristic countries in the world. The landscape of Iran is diverse and beautiful, providing a range of activities from hiking and skiing in the Alborz Mountains, to beach holidays by the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea.

Tourism attracted 2.3 million people to Iran in 2009. However, Iran currently ranks 68th in tourism revenues worldwide.

Iran tourism industry has been characterized by significant numbers of visitors travelling to the country for its diverse attractions, boasting cultural splendors and a diverse and beautiful landscape suitable for a range of activities.

Over the next five years a number of tourism-friendly infrastructure projects will be undertaken on the Persian Gulf island of Kish, which at present attracts around 1m visitors per year, the majority of whom are Iranian. In general, Iranians are warm, friendly and generous individuals with a strong interest in foreigners and other cultures.

Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, the majority of visitors to Iran have been religious pilgrims and businesspeople. Tourism declined dramatically during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s.

Iran Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization has an important role as one of the main pillars of culture and art in the country and the administrator of the lasting heritage of the ancient civilization of Iran, by considering the vastness of the responsibilities turned over, such as introducing its rich culture and civilization, and the cultural, historical, natural and tourism potentials of the country and exploiting its advantages and potentials to promote its real position as one of the large tourism poles in the world.

This issue will be considered especially important in this era in which cultural values have become important sources for the production of economical values, in such a way that nowadays the development of tourism and restoring cultural heritage in creating positive economical effects has noticeably increased and is considered as one of the main factors of creating jobs, increasing foreign currency income and improving the level of payment in all countries.

On the other hand, as an independent, local and pure industry with strong art, cultural, commercial and social aspects, and being in the same path as the tourism development industry, handicrafts can have a considerable share in the commerce of the country and introducing the great Iranian art and finally the economical and cultural life of the country.

To fulfill this purpose, Iran Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHHTO), as an independent organization, has been created in the form of one of the Presidency deputies by combining the three organizations of: Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Iran Touring and Tourism Organization with the purpose of using their potentials to develop tourism, and due to the importance of the activities of this organization and the special attention of the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards the role of handicrafts, cultural heritage and especially tourism, this organization has played a fundamental role in the development of the country in the recent years.

The Deputy of Investment and Projects of ICHHTO is one of the important deputies of this organization and is responsible in creating the substructures of tourism, attracting domestic and foreign investors and providing bank facilities (foreign currency and Rials), arranging the support necessary for the development of this industry, aid in creating substructures, providing wage and interest facilities, discounts in the issuance of construction permits guaranteeing foreign investment within the laws of encouraging and supporting foreign investors, assigning fair tariffs for the required fuel, water and electricity, providing land at fair prices and compiling programs and projects for the development of substructures of different fields of tourism.

Official figures sometimes do not distinguish between those travelling to Iran for business and those coming for pleasure, and they also include a large number of diaspora Iranians returning to visit their families in Iran or making pilgrimages to holy Shia sites near Mashhad and elsewhere. Domestic tourism in Iran is one of the largest in the world. Despite the international tensions, the government continues to project strong rises in visitor numbers and tourism revenue over the forecast period, and to talk of projects to build an additional 100 hotels, for example, to expand its cur-

rently limited stock.

According to Iranian officials, in a change of trend, about 1,659,000 foreign tourists visited Iran in 2004; most came from Asian countries, including the republics of Central Asia, while a small share (about 10%) came from North America and the European Union including Germany, Italy, Bulgaria, France, Belgium. The most popular tourist destinations are Esfahan, Mashhad, and Shiraz. There is undoubtedly great scope for increased visitors from the Islamic world, and possibly also from non-Muslim countries with which Iran is developing business and political links, such as China and India.

The majority of the 300,000 tourist visas granted in 2003 were obtained by Asian Muslims, who presumably intended to visit important pilgrimage sites in Mashhad and Qom. Several organized tours from Germany, France, UK and other European countries come to Iran annually to visit archaeological sites and monuments.

From 2004, the country experienced a 100-percent growth in foreign tourist arrivals until mid-2008 when the number of foreign arrivals surged up to 2.5 million. Specially, there has been an enormous increase in the number of German tourists traveling to Iran in 2008.

About 2.3 million tourists have visited Iran in 2009 according to Iran's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization. About 70,000 of the tourists were from Turkey, 3,000 from Germany, and 3,000 from China, with the rest being from other countries.

Organization of Cultural Heritage and Tourism

This organization is responsible for the establishment, development and operation of tourism facilities in Iran, planning for the repair or extension of tourism facilities through direct investment or providing loans to the private sector or entering into partnership with the private sector, issuing licenses and supervising the establishment and administration of hotels and restaurants and travel agencies and qualification and rating of these units.

In general, Iran has tried to improve its complex and time-consuming visa application process and has begun to issue week-long visas for the nationals of 68 countries at airports. An online hotel reservation system has been developed. Iran will equip all airports with electronic visa facilities by February 2009 to issue online entry permits to foreign nationals.

Iran has 15 road border crossings connecting it with Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Rail lines from Turkey and Turkmenistan can also be used to enter Iran.

About 70% of visitors arrived by land in 2002, about 29% by air and less than 1% by sea. The price of internal flights is heavily subsidized, deterring competition and hampering profitability.

Outward tourism

Traditionally, only a small number of wealthy Iranian tourists travelled abroad, and the majority of the trips were business departures, mostly to neighboring states in the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East, Central Asia and Turkey. Although this is likely to continue to characterize much Iranian travel abroad, since the change of regime in Iraq in 2003, Iranians from all walks of life have visited their western neighbor. In addition, a large proportion of Iranians travelling abroad are likely to be visiting family, especially in Europe, the US and Australia.

Domestic tourism

Domestic tourism supports travel and tourism in Iran, in comparison to the performance of arrivals in 2008, domestic tourism remained strong and continued to play a vital role in supporting travel and tourism in Iran, particularly travel accommodation. Many domestic trips comprise either of religious visits to holy sites such as Mashhad or Qum or visits to family and friends in other parts of the country. Many of these trips are taken by land.

Governmental impact

The Iranian government appears to be targeting tourism as a means of diversifying its economy in order to break away from its continued reliance on oil revenues. In 2005, it developed a 20-year tourism plan to start this process but it has been difficult to establish if any progress has been made, as there do not appear to have been any public reviews to monitor the progress of this plan. Nevertheless, the government has encouraged foreign investment in travel and tourism in the country as well as public-private joint ventures and it has offered tax incentives.



Moshiri: Poet of love, peace and friendship

Fereydoon Moshiri was one of the prominent contemporary Persian poets who versified in both modern and classic styles of the Persian poem.

He is best known as conciliator of classical Persian poetry at one side with the New Poetry initiated by Nima Yushij at the other side. One of the major contributions of Moshiri's poetry is the broadening of the social and geographical scope of modern Persian literature.

The way Moshiri was taken is the final objective of the originators of the Free Style and poetry. It means that he was accepted to use rhymes in a suitable and rational manner and combine it with a new look at nature, things and persons around, along with a delicate feeling and sensation, to present his poems with a characterized feature.

Reflections of Man's feeling towards his life and death, love and destiny, social environment and the whole universe have been the main theme for the selected poems of "Bahar ra baa-var kon" (Believe The Spring) published in 1967.



FEREYDOON MOSHIRI

In October 1997, Moshiri read many of his best poems at a gathering at the University of California, Berkeley. He was a true writer, a researcher, a great editor and columnist for the poetry pages of many magazines and newspapers.

Before he was a poet, Moshiri was a journalist and this occupation helped him to get acquainted with the influential scholar of Persian language and literature such as Ala'me Dehkhoda, Dr. Moein and Ibrahim Pourdavoud.

He was born in Tehran to a family known for their legacy of poetry. His school years were divided between Tehran and Mashhad where his father held administrative posts.

He started poetry with Love and Romance when he was a young boy.

Throughout these years his first poems appeared in progressive journals such as Iran-e-Ma. In 1946 Moshiri joined the Iranian Department of Telecommunication where he served till retirement.

Moshiri's first volume of poetry titled Teshne-ye Toofan (Thirsty for the Storm) was published in 1955. His lyrical poems were widely received and left an impact on a generation of younger poets. Through the later years, Moshiri continued to exercise a major influence on development of modern poetry in Iran.

Later works which were published under the titles "Abro-Koocheh" (The Cloud and The Alley, 1962), and "Bahar Ra Bavar Kon" (Believe The Spring, 1967) embraced a wide variety of universal concepts ranging from humanistic considerations to social justice. A selection of his poems has been translated into English entitled 'With All my Tears' by Ismail Salami.

Moshiri had been suffering from leukemia and renal failure for five years and died in hospital on October 24, 2000.