

# Iran

By Stephen Kafoury, client of Willamette International Travel

April, 2008

"You're going where?" "Aren't you scared?" These were the first utterances from everyone's mouth when I told them I was off to Iran. I needed to explain that I was not afraid. I wanted to go because I had been there once, 40-some years ago, and that I had wanted to return ever since.

My first wife, Gretchen, and I joined the Peace Corps in 1964, right out of college. We were sent to Zanjaan, a small town in Iran, to teach English for two years. It was a life changing experience, especially for a young person, and I had always dreamed of going back. After the revolution and hostage taking in 1979, returning to Iran was out of the question. However, as the political climate moderated, it appeared possible. About 6 years ago, I started tutoring to regain my Farsi (the language of Iran), and applied for a visa. No luck. It turned out that Iran was not allowing Americans into the country except as part of a tour group. That didn't appeal to me, especially as a large part of the reason for going was to return to Zanjaan and people I had known. I wanted to talk to people, and see how the country had changed.

I mentioned this situation at a casual dinner with friends, one of whom was my travel agent Christine Cooper of Willamette International Travel. She said she could arrange a self-guided tour with a Seattle outfit, Caravan-Serai Tours. All I had to do was collect a few adventurous souls, and I would be off.

Many friends turned me down, fearing a visit to an unsettled country, but I finally found four intrepid fellows who were eager to go. I was so excited; I could fulfill a goal that had eluded me for decades.

"Iran"- the name conjures up visions of angry bearded men and black chador- clad women chanting, "Death to America". Fewer than 3000 American tourists visit each year, although the number is growing as the word gets around that the population is truly one of the most pro-American in the whole Middle East, and the romantic wonders of "Persia"- of camel caravans and the Arabian nights- are still here to be found.

Our first, and only, even slightly unpleasant experience happened with Iranian customs at the Tehran airport. Reciprocating for rules that Iranians entering America must follow, we were separated from other entering visitors at the airport and fingerprinted. However, the Iranian officials were very businesslike, and displayed no negative emotion towards us. After that, we were treated like returning long lost friends. We would be stopped several times each day by welcoming folks, inquiring where we were from. When we answered, "America", we heard (often in broken English) "America! ...America good...We love America." When I was able to respond in Farsi, the reaction was even more inviting. People gave us their phone numbers in case we needed help, mentioned relatives living in the U.S., and generally tried to make us feel at home in their country. The only times we experienced any trepidation at all were when we attempted to cross streets where pedestrians apparently put their lives at risk stepping off the curb. Even there, we quickly learned the game of dodging oncoming traffic, and joked about comparing this with running the bulls at Pamplona.



Persians love to have picnics- you see them all over. This is Isfahan. We stopped and chatted with these folks, who were very open and welcoming.

Caravan-Serai had set us up with a van with driver, and a charismatic and knowledgeable guide. Hamid was typical of middle class westernized youth. He, his wife and child, lived in a modern condo that he invited us to see. It contained

all the accoutrements one would find in any American yuppie home. We discussed politics and the social changes the country is going through. In fact, we had the opportunity to talk with many Iranians about the political structure of the Iran, and conflicts with its religious constraints. Never did we feel that people were the least bit hesitant in discussing their views. We were aware, of course, of the controversy surrounding press censorship, but at the personal level, Iranians were quite open about their views.

Iran's capital, Tehran, is a megalopolis of 13 million people, and has experienced, as have many third world big cities, a large influx from the rural areas that has led to massive traffic congestion and resulting air pollution. After a quick tour of the sights, we jetted off to the interior. We delighted to arrive in Shiraz, the southern city of roses, nightingales, and gardens. With the heavy scent of orange blossoms replacing auto fumes, Shiraz was a welcome respite. We saw elegant old mansions and tombs of poets, which are sites of pilgrimages. (In Iran, poets are national heroes, and have streets named after them.) In addition, we toured the first of many ancient architecturally superb mosques covered with intricate and brightly colored ceramic tiles. We shopped in exotic, brick arch-covered bazaars for handicrafts and the famous Persian rugs.

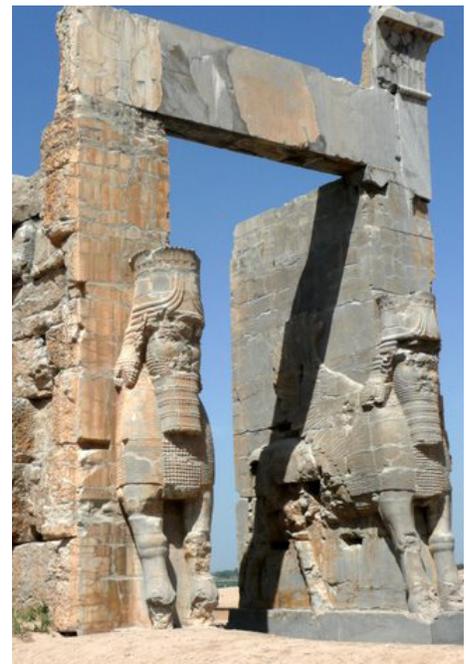
Our hotel accommodations were definitely first rate, and the food lived up to its reputation as the world's third unique cuisine along with France and China. Meals were designed around large plates of steaming saffron rice accompanied by either chicken or lamb kebab, or flavorful stews. Fresh flat bread and yogurt were part of every meal.

Shiraz is the base for visiting one of the world's most extraordinary ruins-Persepolis. Built by Cyrus the Great five hundred years B.C., it was designed for the leader of the world's first empire, and has well preserved bas-reliefs of representatives from vassal nations bearing tribute. Visiting this exposed location would have been harsh under the summer sun, but April was the perfect month, bringing brilliant sunshine without oppressive heat.

Our next stop was Yazd, a city in the middle of the desert. Here we climbed up one of the "towers of silence"- ancient hilltop structures where Zoroastrians until very recently left their dead for birds, believing that burying bodies would pollute the earth. This pre-Islamic religion is still practiced here, and we visited their eternal flame that has been kept burning for centuries. We were also fascinated by what we saw everywhere in the country: covered bazaars filled with both exotic and mundane goods and medieval mosques whose design and scale never failed to leave us filled with wonder.

Long intercity drives were punctuated by stops for picture taking and visits to small towns. This country is filled with amazing sights. We had tea with nomadic shepherds, saw several ruined bridges and fortresses from the 3rd Century Sassanian dynasty, and viewed ancient tombs carved into rock walls with impressive bas-reliefs that have survived the centuries. A series of caravanserais had been built four hundred years ago to serve as motels for camel caravans carrying goods along the Silk Road, and we passed by their remnants frequently.

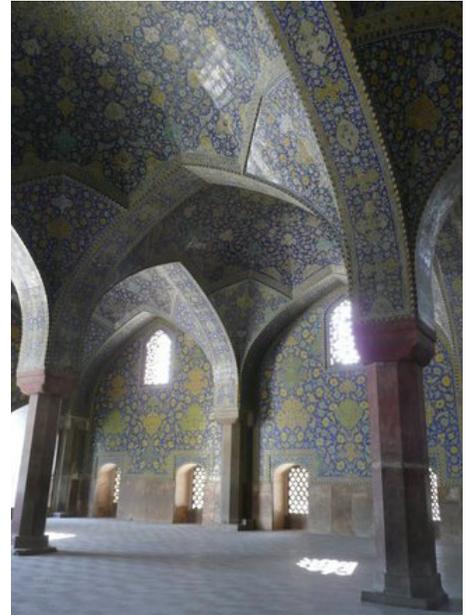
Our last major city was Isfahan, and it lived up to its ancient motto, "Isfahan, nesfe Jahan", which means Isfahan is half the world. In the early 1600s, Shah Abass the Great built a huge public square several hundred yards on a side. At one end is the Shah Mosque, covered with mosaic tiles with a brilliant blue dominating. We were awestruck by its combination of enormous scale and intricate and colorful detail. The second side is the small jewel box Sheikh Lofallah Mosque, perhaps the most beautiful in the world. Opposite the Shah Mosque is the entrance to the Grand Bazaar, with art found nowhere else such as delicate Persian miniatures and hand block printed cloths. On the fourth side is the Ali Qapu Palace where the shah would sit in luxury on his balcony and watch polo being played on the enormous field. This palace is one of three left from the city's original 14, each an architectural treat. The other two are found in the center of verdant gardens with water features and walls covered with paintings of court scenes. A series of bridges from the same period cross the wide river running through the city, providing pedestrian walkways and arched nooks for intimate conversations. Along both sides of the river is a 10-mile parkway with paths and lush plantings that made one forget the arid countryside just outside the city.



Gates of Persepolis

As we traveled, it was obvious to me that Iran has made considerable progress in becoming a developed nation. Dirt roads had been replaced with 6-lane freeways, public restrooms were clean, much new greenery had been planted, and where farmers used to ride donkeys to the fields they plowed with oxen, they're now riding motorcycles and driving tractors. Even remote villages now have electricity, and illiteracy is nearly gone. Still, Iran is paying the price for rapid development: urban sprawl, severely polluted air, and trash everywhere.

We then turned northwest for the emotional high point of my trip. Through an Iranian friend who now lives abroad, I had arranged to see his family to whom I had been very close during my Peace Corps years. Two middle aged men met us at our hotel in Zanzan, and although one had been 14 and the other 8 when I saw them last, I recognized them immediately. I was truly touched by their reaction to my visit. I was kissed on both cheeks many times, and tears flowed. We all toured the town, which had quadrupled in size, and saw the house in which I had stayed and the school where I had taught. No longer were horse drawn wagons and donkeys the main mode of transportation, but new streets had been built to accommodate automobile traffic. Much of the old adobe construction had been completely demolished to make way for new brick buildings. Yet the bazaar, and the historic area surrounding it, had been preserved. I spent several hours in the same family home where I had been a guest so many years ago. My Farsi and their English combined to allow sufficient communication for a joyful reunion. My journey was complete.



Inside the Shah Mosque

Iran is obviously a controversial country- our president has labeled it part of the “Axis of Evil”, and its president has made outrageous statements about Israel. However, after my visit, I am optimistic about the younger generation of Iranians. I believe more contact between Americans and Iranians can only improve relations between us, and tourists should feel comfortable traveling to this fascinating land.