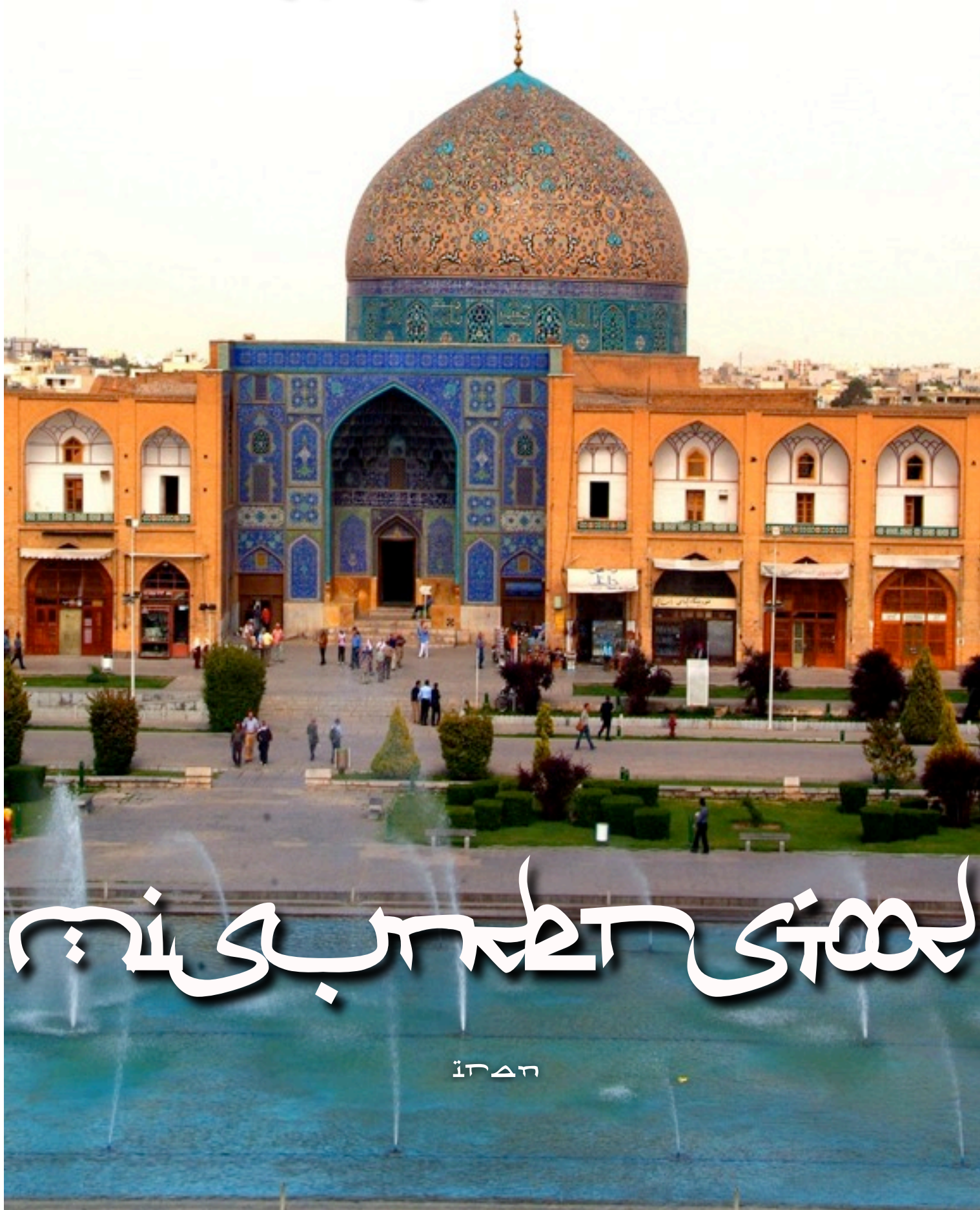


کتابخانه ملی جمهوری اسلامی



کتابخانه ملی

iran

PREFACE

The international community's sad perception of Iran as a notorious liar creates confusion about the true face of this fascinating country. And it is fascinating in more than one way. Its history is grand. Iran, formerly Persia, once was one of world's largest empires. Pieces of Persian remarkable architecture were unquestionably progressive at their times and structures of Esfahan, Shiraz, Yazd and a few other cities on Iranian soil rate amongst the most striking, beautiful and irreplaceable in the world.

It is really hard to overstate the striking and phenomenal beauty of Iran's finest cities. Their architecture, unprecedented, unique and exceptional, is a rare example of how greatly precious the mankind is in the Universe. Furthermore, Iran was the very place where the civilisation emerged on this planet. Sites across the country show evidence of pre-Mesopotamian urbanisation and culture. For Iran before it became Persia, had been one of the unquestionably and undeniably grandest, mightiest, richest, unrivalled, incomparable and most striking countries on Earth.

Through its territory, the legendary Silk route passed, as well as the grand armies of world's greatest leaders, such as Genghis Khan of Mongolia and Alexander The Great

of Macedonia. Each with very different consequences to the cities and their people. Iran is world's eighteenth largest country. Much of the territory is covered by an inhospitable desert. Yet, there is really a lot to see in Iran.

At the time of writing, (late 2007, early 2008), the United States of America, obsessed with the Middle East, kept lobbying the international society to launch a military action against Iran. Supposedly as a penalty for Iranian nuclear enrichment programme. I already missed my chance of going to Iraq, which hosted world's most treasured artefacts of the ancient Mesopotamia, as it became off limits for tourist, following an American invasion. I did not want to miss my chance with Iran!

And so, when bmi started flying directly between London and Tehran, I quickly booked my tickets and started planning a short spring holiday. It was exciting and thrilling in equal measure.

the plan



The Iranian visa requirements, I mean those acceptable ones, restrict tourists to stay in the country for longer than a week, I found in the available literature before setting off. That also restricted the potential itineraries. Therefore, I needed to be selective, what I wanted to see.

With my bmi ticket, I could not avoid the capital. I was not sure whether Tehran had anything interesting to offer to a visitor like me, but I had not much choice. I obviously planned my trip in every possible way to avoid spending too much time there. Yet, my plan anticipated that I would have to spend at least two nights in the capital. But that was going to change.

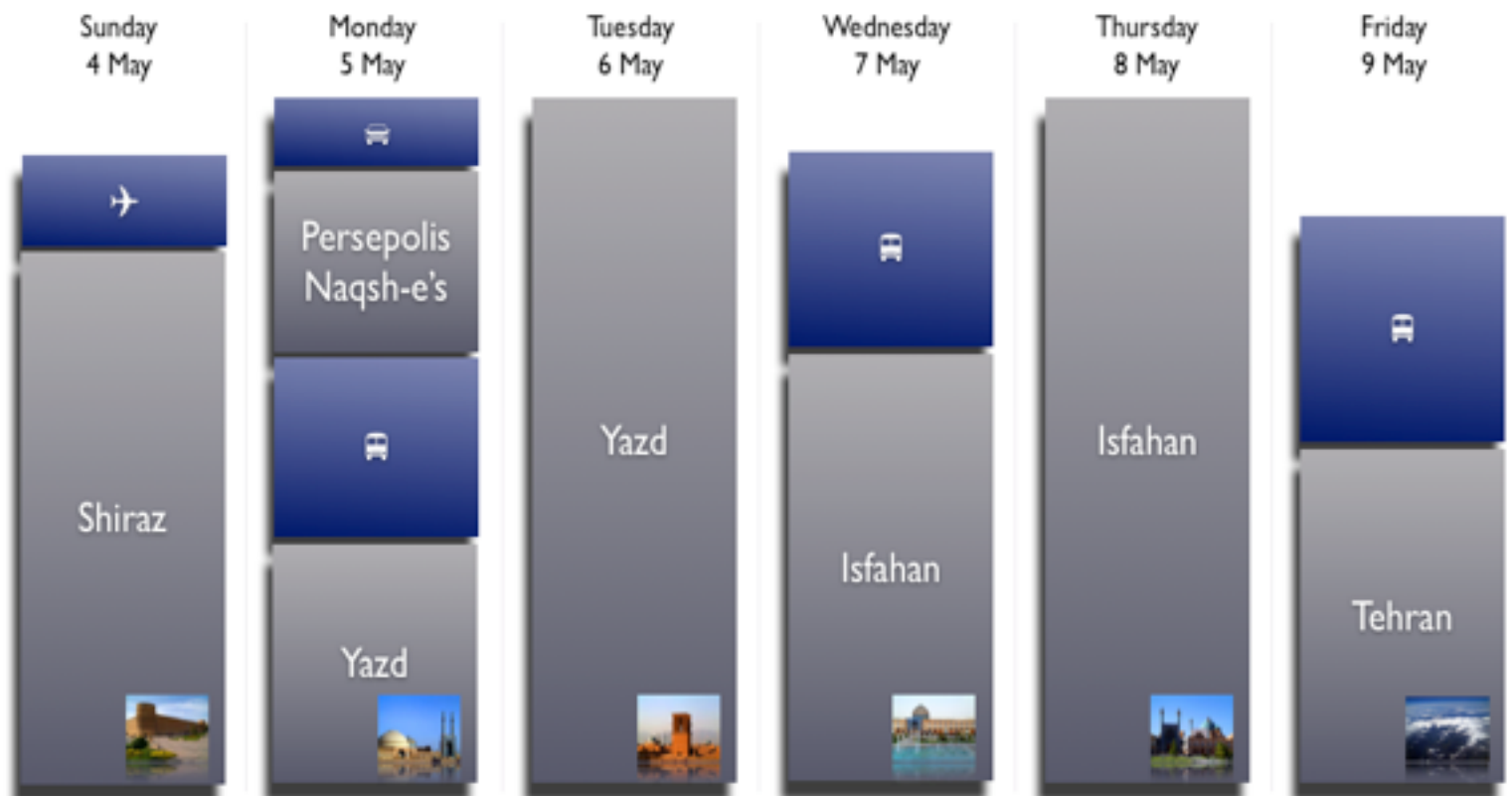
After a few hours of browsing through available resources regarding Iran, its attractions, airlines, trains, etc. I managed to establish what the itinerary might be. I actually had four different drafts, depending on luck and ... a few other factors.

According to the Internet blogs, forums, and travel reports, I only had one week, as this is how long I was going to get on my visa on arrival. Therefore, I had to plan that I would need to fly between the main cities. With the exception of the very short route from Shiraz to Persepolis and even shorter from Persepolis to Naqsh-e Rostam, for which I had to take a car.

According to a few websites, there were two main domestic airlines:

-  Iran Air
-  Iran Aseman Airlines

The latter was the one that flew to the ancient city of Bam. I was not sure why Iran Air would not go there, not even its charter





arm. So, although it was a less known carrier, I planned to use it.

After a careful consideration, I selected the following sites to visit in Iran:

- Bam
- Tehran
- Esfahan
- Shiraz
- Persepolis
- Naqsh-e Rostam
- Naqsh-e Rajab
- Pasargadae
- Yazd
- Kashan

It was quite a lot for a week. Due to rubbish timetable of the airlines, I had to rush in Shiraz to visit all four or five sites in about 27 hours (including having some sleep at night): Shiraz, Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam. Persepolis was some 70 kilometres from Shiraz and Naqsh-e Rostam further 12 kilometres north west from Persepolis. For all other places I thought I should have enough time - about a day each, with the exception of Kashan, where I planned to spend about half a day, on the way to Esfahan.

Four of the sites in my itinerary were on the UNESCO's World Heritage List. They were

obviously the ancient mud city of Bam, the former capital of the Persian Empire - Persepolis, the neighbouring Pasargadae and Esfahan's grand piazza - Naghsh-e Jahan Square.

Esfahan has been reported to hide a secret nuclear enrichment laboratories. Now, if the USA or Israel would like to bomb Esfahan, they would face an overwhelming protest from the UN and the international society. Rightly so! For Esfahan hosts unique, invaluable, mankind's most important and unparalleled structures.

But I had to wrestle a lot with the planning process. First, the Iranian Airspace Authorities, or some other similar body, moved all international flights from Europe to the new International Airport, many miles from the previous airport. Therefore my bmi flight was no longer destined to the airport from where I planned to kick off my visit. Instead, the flights schedules and the time necessary to transfer between the airports stripped me off many options. I had to create two additional versions of the holiday's route. Then, bmi changed their own schedule with the planned arrival two hours earlier than before, which, not surprisingly, opened new possibilities.

Anyway, this is what I thought, and eventually, I created six versions of the

itinerary, none of which was certain to work. More about this a little later.

VISA

The Iranian immigration authorities quite progressively introduced a scheme of visa on arrival for a number of nationalities. Those nations with unfriendly attitude towards Iran and the region were excluded from the scheme, which of course included the USA, and the UK - two of the three nations that led the occupying forces in Iraq. Poland, somehow escaped the ban.

This meant that I could use my Polish passport and need not to apply for a visa before travelling to Iran. It was of course greatly convenient for me. I was a little unsure of this, though. I wanted to verify the facts with the Iranian embassy in London. Yet, it was impossible to get anyone on the telephone there. Then, I tried the embassy in Warsaw, and again it looked like the telephone was not a tool they would use there, either. And so, my only option was to ask... IATA.

There were two websites that allowed visa verifications. One was the Star Alliance, the other - IATA Travel Centre. Both claimed that a traveller with a Polish passport could

obtain a tourist visa to Iran on arrival on certain airports, provided one had \$50 in cash to pay for it and two passport-size photographs. And that was not accurate.

Upon arrival, the immigration authorities required €50 but no photographs. It was absolutely necessary to ensure that the visa application contained a valid address and a telephone number of the place where one was planning to stay whilst in Iran. There were a few, suspiciously looking Russian men, who could not figure it out. They had major problems in getting their visa applications approved.

Otherwise, the process was rather painless and if a little slow, visa on arrival was usually granted for two weeks. I got 15 days. Had I known that this would be the case, I would have planned a longer holiday in this vast country. Yet again, two weeks was not a rule and apparently, it dependent on the officers' mood how long they were going to grant. Or perhaps it dependent on the nationality of the passport holder. That remains a mystery.

I could potentially change my plans, since I was able to change my flight back to London, but I already made commitments in

time for my planned return, so I decided stick to my weekly plan.

RESERVATIONS

Well, having made a plan with a tight schedule, I wanted to make some reservations. At least for the internal flights. But this was not possible from outside Iran. Well, almost. The Iran Air offices in Europe refused to make any bookings for domestic flights unless one would travel to Iran with Iran Air. That was so vicious. I could not believe it. It was not the very first impression of Iran I was hoping for. The only way for securing a booking for a domestic flight was through a travel agent. I found a couple, but they wanted to charge me €30 for the pleasure. Hardly a pleasure, when a cost of a single ticket within Iran was about €27! So, I was debating whether I should allow for such an obscene robbery.

After joining globosapiens.net, I got in touch with a few native Iranians, still based in their home country. They offered me support, advice and assistance in checking about hotels and possibly making domestic flights

bookings. However, even they could not help. Apparently, the regulations changed two months previously and any bookings of a domestic flight had to be paid for on the spot. I could not use my credit cards due to the trading embargo on Iran. Neither Visa or Mastercard (Europay) would approve a transaction with an Iranian entity.

This way, on the day of my arrival in Iran, I was facing a risk of fully booked flights and the need of quickly rethinking my holiday. Not a comfortable situation with a tight schedule like mine. I had no choice, however. And yet, as it turned out, I need not worry.

ARRIVAL

Arrival at the IKA international airport in the morning looked like a mistake. Once you queued for one hour to process your visa and then again one hour to go through immigration, you thought of getting out of the building. This was however not easy. There was no transport. Taxi offices were either closed or there were no taxis available. The sun was rising beautifully and





I was stuck in the terminal forever. Well, actually it was a forever-felt-like 45 minutes. Sadly not a first impression I was hoping for. To be fair, the ladies at the taxi booth I chose were friendly and most helpful but could do little with no taxis available.

When I eventually got a ride and hit the traffic in the capital, I knew I had to get out of there. My original plan to spend a day in Tehran on the way back was seriously threatened. Yes, there was the palace complex of which I could not stop thinking but when I arrived in the capital on Friday afternoon on my way back to London, it was closed. Friday being a day off was not helping me much with sightseeing. Not that I was bothered that much. I saw what I wanted in Iran, mainly. But about this later.

At the domestic airport Terminal 2, from which Iran Air operated, they told me that the flights to Shiraz and Esfahan were full. I was directed to Terminal 4 (I needed to take a taxi for 20,000 rials), from which other domestic airlines flew.

As soon as I waked through the door into a relatively messy terminal, I was relieved to

find an information desk right in the middle of the floor. I asked at the desk about the flights and they kindly advised me that I could try Iran Aseman Airlines. Their flight to Shiraz was leaving within 45 minutes. With great luck I found their unsigned ticket office and a very chaotic group of people hoping to get their names read out from the waiting list.

After a few second of dialogue I managed to get my name added to the list. I hit a little resistance from the man in the white uniform-like shirt but he reluctantly put my name down. Literally half a minute later, his colleague, dressed exactly the same, started to read out the names of people from the very list, who were allowed to travel that morning. And with another piece of luck (or otherwise, perhaps) my name was read out before others', who most definitely were at the ticket office before me. I was on the aircraft within 5 minutes. Lucky me!

It was a small Fokker 100 jet, which saw slightly better day, but seemed in a very good condition. The seats were allocated predominantly according to gender. The safety demonstration was not shocking but

pretty normal, like on any other airline I had travelled before. Announcements were made in both Farsi and English, and continental breakfast was served. Free of charge!

At this stage, I knew that none of my original six plans for the holiday's route were going to work. None of them were kicking off in Shiraz. I tried to quickly devise new plans and options. Yet, having just realised that flights were fully booked, I began to worry a little. Later, I realised that it was completely unnecessary.

shiraz

To the wine enthusiasts, Shiraz would denote the place where certain grape variety emerged. Although no longer cultivated there, the name is unmistakable. Yet, the ancient shirazi wine was white, and the modern Shiraz wine is exclusively red.

Shiraz appeared big and busy to me. I thought that perhaps Teheran had problems with its air, but so had Shiraz. Definitely. The

fumes combined with dust and dryness of the air were violating my nose so terribly that I eventually started to bleed.

Motorcycles riding on pavement were my other headache. Not only was crossing a street a mission impossible, but the speeding motorbikes between pedestrians in their theoretically safe zone caused additional stress.

I bet Shiraz looked diametrically different from the times when it had been the capital of Persia under the Zand dynasty in the second half of the 18th century. Or when it was a centre of Persian Renaissance in the 13th and 14th centuries, during which cultured rulers allowed for arts to blossom, including poetry mastered by Hafez, Iran's most important poet. Sanctuary in his name in Shiraz's Melli Park is like a pilgrimage spot, particularly for the young at heart.

The city had been so famous in the world that it had a special place on the most important trade routes. Its famous wine allegedly exported to Europe gave name to one of world's most popular grape variety, now grown around the world.

Well, when I visited shops were everywhere. Absolutely in countless numbers. Architecture around them changed after the trading routes moved away from the city, following the growing importance of the ports and the introduction of the railway. And many important structures from the past were destroyed or replaced by 'modern' ones changing the face of Shiraz forever, stripping it from the evidence how grand it once had been.

The intriguing fortress, Arg-e Karim Khani, right in the heart of the city was my favourite spot. It was the residence of Karimkhan Zand and its government. From the outside it looked like castle or citadel but inside it was a park with ponds full of coins. Small trees planted there provided shade and a perfect escape from a frantic traffic outside. Although the Arg was located by a very pleasant pedestrianised section of the main street (as traffic continued underground) complete with small fountains and carefully cultivated greenery.

The fort contained a small photo gallery - a museum and displayed two models of Shiraz. The gallery attracted almost all locals

visiting. The entrance to the Arg, between the leaning south-eastern tower and the straight north-eastern one, had an interesting mosaic presenting a battle between white devil and Rostam. And the angle at which one of the towers was sloping looked seriously scary. Apparently specialist from the Pisa tower were tried to help but when I visited there was no evidence that anything had been done. There was no supporting scaffolding or anything else suggesting that perhaps the tower had been left to its fate.

I loved the fact that it was expected that tourists would want to enter the mosques and have a look around. Despite the fact that many would not be Muslim. Moreover, many important mosques had chador rental for women, although I noticed that the vast majority of them had already put on some sort of head scarf out of respect for the local culture. What an incredible approach and attitude towards the visitors from a non-Islamic world!

Only in Morocco's Meknes and Egypt's Cairo had I encountered such an openness and that was only for one mosque each. In





remote areas of West Africa I was also allowed to enter an Islamic school or a small mosque, and in Libya (if I remember well) it was also fine, I think. Otherwise mosques were off limits for me in the vast majority of places I had a chance to visit.

In Shiraz, the Regent's Mosque (Masjed-e Vakil) was one of the major attractions. It was being slowly renovated when I visited but people would still come there to pray. Its courtyard was grand and the two gates (iwans) typically decorated for a mosque entry. However, rather unusually for Iran, red colour had been used for many floral decorations. It looked really special.

I noticed the same for the Khan Islamic School. Actually, since Kham also commissioned the Regent's Mosque in about 1773, that should not be a surprise. The school is a sight of itself.

The Regent's Mosque inside was less colourful and the hall of arched ceiling and columns had only one line of arches decorated with mosaic. It was the one in straight line with the iwans. The rest was

more sombre, sandstone colour, but elegantly carved.

Other sights also include the Eram Pavillion (which I skipped) and a few smaller historic mosques like the deep blue Nasir-ol-Molk Mosque, from the 19th century, and a Jameh-ye Atigh Mosque.

Esteghlale hotel was my choice. It was very basic but some rooms had a shower and one or two also a toilet. Otherwise the Asian-method loos were on the main corridor and instead of toilet paper or a bidet there was a hose connected to the main tap. Rooms with shower were 120,000 rials. Nice firm beds and a fan. The taxi driver who brought me from the airport said that it was not a good hotel and that I should stay at the Persia. I told him that I would love to stay there but he would have to pay for my stay.

Mineral water was 2,000 rials and so was a small soda. Big soft drinks were 5,000 rials.

Before the revolution, Esteghlale was the only hotel in Shiraz, apparently. It was known as Tourist hotel. Now, there are many

other options. Popular mid range was Eram, when I visited. It did not look very splurgy but the personnel was polite and could organise trips in the area. I only saw the lobby area and the restaurant, which perhaps could do with some more thorough scrub. I heard the rooms was the same.

I thought about but I eventually did not go out in Shiraz. I went to bed just about the time when shops started to trade on their second breath. Lanterns and powerful light bulbs were lit and the night buzz of shopping and socialising over tea kicked off.

Iran being teatotalers' state, tea was the main party beverage. I have not spotted any tea-nightclubs (or any other type, actually), though. Hehe. Little tearooms or teahouses were tucked between the shops. I don't think there was a district in Shiraz that would be the party place.

Eram Garden and the Melli Park with the poet Hafez tomb were prime candidates for chilling and killing time. The Melli Park was frequented by the young at heart mainly. It

was a great place proving pleasant shade and the greenery of trees.

The Eram Garden was known for its Eram Pavilion, one of Shiraz's most famous building, often representing Shiraz on posters.

Other than that, the Vakil Bazaar was a great place to hide. It was splendid for people watching and exercising all the senses, often all of them at once. The merchants were not pushy so just walking inside the bazaar did not pose a threat to the wallet.

Sarve Naz Restaurant of the Eram Hotel was my choice. And there was not much of a choice in the centre, I'm afraid. I had a fantastic Caucasian Kebab (\$4.5), which was a mix of chicken and lamb, cut to small cubes and served like fajitas on a sizzling plate but with flat Iranian bread in place for tortillas. I washed it down with Istak, non alcoholic beer. It was nice, a little sweet but rather tasty. The menu contained also other types of kebabs and meat dishes. Many in the range of \$3-5. An excellent value indeed.

The service was efficient and friendly. They allowed me to stay in before opening so I could have a small bottle of Pepsi as I waited for the cook to arrive and typed these words.

PERSEPOLIS

Whilst in Shiraz, one has to visit Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam and Naqsh-e Rostam. The first is the sight of once one of the greatest ancient cities on Earth, and nowadays one of few sites of evidence how grand Persian Empire was. It is truly a spectacular place.

Naqsh-es are royal tombs. The Naqsh-e Rostam is wonderful. It features four tombs carved in the shape of giant crosses inside a rock escarpment. Beneath them fabulous relieves were carved in the rock representing battles and the moments of glory. One of the tombs is of the Darius I the Great, who started building Persepolis and was eventually defeated by Alexander the Great of Macedonia.

The trip can be easily made in half a day by taxi (€17) from Shiraz. Any hotel can organise it or a car can be called from the street. Group tours can work out cheaper. There was no public transport when I visited. Entry to the sites: 5,000; 3,000; and 2,000 rials respectively.

Persepolis once was, supposedly, the capital of the most powerful empire on the globe. Its beauty was only rivalled by Babylon at that time, perhaps. Supposedly, since to this day, historians have not agreed a common position regarding Persepolis's status as a capital. It was expanded by Darius I the Great, the same responsible for the Battle of Marathon but then Persia was the Achaemenid Empire, whose capital was Ecbatana (now modern town of Hamedan), apparently. Although it cannot be ruled out that Persia had more than one capital during the time of Darius I the Great. Now, it is just a splendid collection of ruined columns, piazzas, arches and remains of grand palaces.

Only 55km from Shiraz there is one of the greatest ancient sites on Earth. Had the



terrific leader Darius I the Great, who started building it, lived long enough to complete its creation, Persepolis would most definitely become the capital of the Persian Empire. Or perhaps if Alexander the Great had not attacked the Persians, then again it might have been the capital, too and even more would have remained to this day.

Persepolis seriously impressed me! The carvings on the walls of this city, many of which survived in remarkable condition, must have made it mind-boggling place. Records suggest that the carvings were painted in vivid colours. Wow! My jaw dropped when I saw the single colour winged warriors, saddled horses, raging lions and countless delegates from neighbouring kingdoms. I could not imagine how spectacular the halls and courtyards looked painted. One of the massive reliefs from the treasury was one of the most fascinating things I have ever seen.

I arrived at 7:45 am, so I had the site virtually for myself. Only at about 9:30 am hordes of tourists began swarming in. For two hours I kept wandering in amazement. And snapping frenzily. I went almost twice around the entire city. The site was well organised and carefully watched. Relatively clean toilets were available in both the visitor centre and just beside the ancient treasury hall. A museum, teahouse, cafeteria, snack shop, gift shops, and even Iranian fastfood outlet complemented the facilities.

The key monuments were described in both Persian and English and the city was signposted. Parts of Persepolis received wooden walkways otherwise one had to walk on a very uncomfortable gravel floor.

Although uncertain of its formal status as the capital of the ancient Persian Empire, Persepolis was recognised as one of the most important cities under the reign of several Persian Emperors, including Darius I the Great, responsible for the strengthening (and eventually losing) the Persian rule in the region and the world's most famous battle ever, the Battle of Marathon.

Since Persepolis was so grand and alluring, it has now been generally accepted that it must have been a ceremonial capital of the empire. There were at least three pieces of evidence to suggest that. The first one was the audience hall, the Apadana. It had 72 columns and fabulously decorated walls and stairways. The second one was the Tachara Palace, including the Throne Hall, so carefully sculpted and polished that it dazzled. And finally, the Treasury. It was like a fortress within the city. Now, the city is inscribed by UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage Site, an irreplaceable, unique and most important site for the history of





mankind. It was included in the list on the second session of the UNESCO Committee, which dealt with the inscriptions.

The Tachara Palace was my favourite place. It was built southwest of the Apadana and at a level three meters higher than was the private residence of Darius I the Great. The surface of its walls was so finely polished that at some places the stone reflected images, and for this reason people used to call it "the Mirror Hall". It consisted of a square hall surrounded by a portico with eight columns on the south, two rooms each with four columns on the north and guard-rooms on the other sides. The palace was started by Darius and finished by Xerxes. These two and their accompanying attendants are represented on the jambs of the northern and southern doorways of the main hall in the act of entering and leaving.

The Tachara must have been the most beautiful palace of Persepolis. Many of its original ornaments made of precious stones, were taken by Alexander the Great in

330BC. It wasn't allowed to enter when I visited. I could only admire it from the main doorway.

Persepolis's greatest asset today are the remains of magnificent decorations. So many of them! One of the fantastically preserved is the south wing of the eastern stairway of the Apadana. It shows three registers of sculpted figures. They represent 23 delegations sent by the nations subject to the Persian Empire to present their gifts to the Great King of Nawrooz. Each delegation is led towards the royal seat by a Median or Persian usher. Unlike Assyrian, Egyptian and Babylonian analogies, these delegations seem calm and happy, coming as free and invited guests rather than brought as slaves and forced into prostration in front of the royal throne.

The delegations could be identified by their costumes and gifts, and included: the Medes, Elamites, Arians, Arachosians (of Afghanistan), Bactrians, Assagartians, Babylonians, Scythians, Gandarians, Lydians,

Cappadocians, Ionians, Parthians, Indians and Armenians. It was amazing to be able to see that! A truly overwhelming sight.

The Treasury of Persepolis was built on the south east of the terrace by Darius the Great and enlarged by his son Xerxes. It was a fortress-like rectangular structure, with thick walls and only one entrance at the northeast corner.

It was one of the richest in the world, and Alexander the Great reportedly used 3,000 camels and mules to carry off its contents, worth over 120,000 talents of silver. Even so, archaeologists have discovered various objects, whole or mutilated, from this site, including many vessels, statue fragments, eight stone tablets engraved with an inscription by Xerxes, and a number of clay tablets inscribed in Elamite and recording payments to the workers at Persepolis.

The Audience Relief - a huge slab of stone ornamented with an audience scene is one of the two similarly sculpted panels

discovered in 1930s at the Treasury (the other was taken to Tehran). They originally decorated the stairway of the Apadana, but Artaxerxes I had removed them for political reasons.

Just above the Treasury, there was a tricky and slippery path towards mysterious rock-hewn structures. They hide the tombs of Artaxerxes II and Artaxerxes III. I liked the tomb of Artaxerxes II, because it was slightly closer to Persepolis and offered better views of the city. There was a small platform at the foot of the tomb, which was great for hanging out and just watching the ancient site from the bird's view. If you brought picnic, this is where to have it!

When I climbed it, I had the entire hill for myself. Mind you, I was there early in the morning, and there was hardly anyone at Persepolis at that time. I would imagine that if had come two hours later, I would have had to share my hill with someone else. Anyway, in the morning, the platform was pleasantly shaded by the cliff and the view

of the remaining columns of the ancient city casting long shadows was unforgettable.

I loved the shy morning sun somewhat sheepishly peaking from behind a thin layer of white cloud. It illuminated some of the fabulous reliefs and carvings wonderfully and gently. That was perfect for my picture taking. I was proud of myself of selecting the morning for the escapade.

A few sections of the site were closed for some reason, which was a little disappointing but still the general access allowed close inspection of the individual elements of the city and its decorations. I was also impressed with the admission charge - 5,000 rials (£0.27)!

Naqsh-e Rostam

From Persepolis I went to see ancient royal tombs. The first one was Naqsh-e Rostam,

which boasted fantastic reliefs, three of which of considerable size. The tomb looked like an entry to a grotto or a cave. I spent 2,000 rials on the ticket and about ten minutes admiring the carvings.

Naqsh-e Rostam

The second, and last, stop was at the amazing Naqsh-e Rostam. The site comprised of four magnificently rock hewn tombs high in the cliff, decorated with reliefs. One of them was the tomb of Darius I the Great. The tombs were hewn in the form of regular massive crosses.

The site was completed by an intriguing tower, which although made of stone, looked like a wooden structure. A stunning place. And it is visible for a few kilometres. The tombs looked spectacular from the distance. And they lost nothing in their awesomeness when viewed from up close.





Yazd

I dedicated 6 hours of my life to an uneventful bus ride from Shiraz to Yazd. I suffered a little but was glad that the bus arrived one hour early. Almost all the way from Shiraz, it was a motorway. Small sections were still based on a regular single lane highway, but work was being done to complete the entire motorway. This should shave off perhaps even 30 minutes more from the trip.

Yazd appeared larger than I expected or imagined from discussions with Iranians in Shiraz. Arriving in the hours of darkness can of course be deceiving and does not belong to things I like the most. En route, I noticed few illuminated monuments. The rest of town seemed dark and calm. It most definitely was leaving an impression of a mysterious ancient city that hides many secrets.

Yazd is on the legendary Silk Route. Not so much legendary as factual. And apparently it

is a good place to buy silk products. I was not interested in shopping.

I made a friend of one of the waiters at the hotel, where I was staying. His was a refugee from Afghanistan and worked at the hotel for food. They did not pay him. His name was Samin. He was very polite professionally and very funny outside business hours. He was very kind to show me around Yazd and even negotiated a taxi to see places out of town. At the age of 20 he had experienced much and his life in Iran was not easy. As a refugee he had a permit to stay on the country but was not allowed to go to university or be employed. Somehow, the Iranian government did not care how he was supposed to earn his money to live, at the same time allowing the black market to take care of him.

The Amir Chakhmag Complex was my favourite spot. The square was spacious, the building or rather facade was splendid and the fountains completed this perfect picture. What an unusual structure! The gradual three storey facade appeared to be just an over the top portal to a tiny market inside or

rather behind it. The best time to see it was at sunset as sun rose almost exactly behind the facade making viewing uncomfortable and taking pictures very challenging. The Amir Chakhmag Square was not very popular. Every time I went there, it was almost completely deserted. A few people kept themselves busy in the market moving bottles and other objects around. So it was a fantastic place to snooze and reflect on how misunderstood Iran and Iranians are by the West.

The old town is a-maze-ing. I loved it. Many alleys were tunnels in this fabulous structure of mud brick. Some if the tunnels had arched ceiling making the old Yazd look like from a town from planet Tatooine (those readers who have not seen Star Wars - should!). Wandering around either in those tunnels or in the labyrinth of narrow alleys flanked by tall mud walls was fantastic. Surely I would have got lost if I had been walking alone. The Yazd authorities put a few signs around pointing directions to selected monuments and museums, but they really did not make the trick. There were too few and only put on main junctions. How to



get to those junctions was left up to the visitors. I really loved it. The sunrays struggled with great effort to penetrate the corridors and tunnels leaving them cool and pleasant.

A few hotels converted from traditional houses offered terraces from which the entire old town could be seen and its wind towers, several thousands years old air conditioning system.

Apart from the wind towers Yazd's main attraction was Jameh Mosque. Its supertall portal decorated with countless tiles of different shades of blue and green and two minarets rising immediately from its top could hardly fit in the frame of a regular camera. The mosque's dome was additionally decorated with orange tiles. While the portal had some floral elements of decoration, the dome had only geometric figures.

The old town was hiding many smaller and older mosques, some of which were cosy and almost intimate. There was also an interesting Yazd Water Museum (free entry) explaining the extensive system of underground water channels called qanat created to supply water to the town and crop fields in the area.

I also liked the alleged Alexander's Prison complex including the oldest temple in Yazd. The prison had a superb underground cafe with a central fountain under the circular skylight.

But one of the greatest sights were the Towers of Silence, remains of the Zoroastrian tradition of 'burying' the deceased. Two large circular but not tall towers on the top of two hills (one per hill) were used to display the bodies to be consumed by vultures. Putting bodies in the ground would contaminate the earth otherwise. The towers were out of

town slightly, and there was no public transport. A taxi hired for an hour set me back by 18,000 rials.

I made a booking in the Silk Road Hotel but when I arrived, I was told that the management decided to book me in another of their hotels, The Orient. I really liked the Silk Road and its magnificent courtyard with fountains and little garden, but when I saw The Orient, I decided not to complain. It was based on the same principle. It was a converted traditional house with large courtyard in the middle.

In the evening it also looked nice and its rooftop terrace offered incredible views of Yazd, including the Jameh Mosque and the Chahmag Square. Having tea there in the evening with such a fabulous view of the huge blue portal of the Jameh Mosque has become unforgettable. Definitely a highlight of the trip.

The single rooms (300,000 rials) were simple but came with clean en-suite bathroom, European style toilet, towels, simple toiletries, etc. but no toilet roll. I wasn't sure if it was a standard or overlooking. I didn't have to check - I brought my own.

Apparently, it was illegal to smoke sheesha in Yazd, and apparently it was only allowed in specific locations in Iran. There was no reason for this cruel restriction. Cruel, because... how can you strip people from this simple pleasure? It is traditional in the entire Middle East!! And yet, I managed to get invited to sheesha and tea party. The waiters (actually they also worked as a general help) at the hotel invited me. We went to their quarters at the back of the hotel, sat on what looked like very old carpets, drank tea and smoked this fabulous water pipe.

We tried two apple flavours. One from Egypt and the other from Russia. And talked. Gossiped. Laughed. Talked a little about politics and plenty about travelling and other cultures of our beautiful planet. This took us

to about 1:30 in the morning. What a great night!

Otherwise, I spotted few public cafes and chilling places. Nightclubs obviously did not exist but even tearooms were very few and far between.

The park was a very pleasant spot in the old town. It had a great and tall wind tower under which the air was cool and windows of which were decorated with colourful stained glass. This public park surrounded with an arg-like mud brick wall had a long and narrow pond with numerous little fountains. Along the pond, under the trees there were benches with carpets and cushions for chilling and stretching. What a hangout place! Furthermore, the wind tower building had a very atmospheric little cafe with a fountain and stained glass skylights. This was a perfect spot for locals to bring a date and cuddle and for tourists to break their getting lost in the labyrinth of the old town.

Desert trips seemed to be a side activity. Every hotel could organise one. Actually,

three night stay at either the Orient, Oasis or Silk Road (all under the same management and about 100 yards from one another) qualified for a free night stay at their desert guesthouse.

There is a very interesting henna factory in Yazd. The mills are now powered by engines but the giant central grinding stone and the mechanism are from the times when camels were used to move the core. The factory is not an obvious tourist object in a typical itinerary. My new friend Samin took me there, as he used to work in the factory. I found it really interesting to see how Iranians worked, what health and safety procedures were in place - not bad at all; protective clothing, dust masks, etc.

The first night I ate at the Orient Hotel. The restaurant's menu listed about 15 Yazd specialties, most of which were based on camel and mutton meat, as well as a few Indian dishes, the top one being chicken curry (in the range of 30,000 to 45,000 rials). I hesitated a little regarding camel meal. I had not eaten all day, so I would





have preferred something I'd enjoy to risking something new I might potentially hate. So I chickened out and ordered a traditional chicken stew with rice. It automatically came with flat Iranian bread. It was fine. I had slight difficulty removing the meat from the bones, but otherwise tasty. The sauce, based on onions and tomatoes, was slightly spicy and had a good structure. I drank Delster, Iranian alcohol-free beer.

Amir Chakhmag Cafe, right in the Amir Chakhmag complex served huge traditional kebabs and chicken pieces grilled on a skewer with tomatoes, onions and flat Iranian bread for about 33,000 including large lemon beer. Only locals and refugees ate there. I tried the chicken, which looked yummy but was slightly undercooked.

Originally, I wanted to try the pizza opposite the complex but it was closed. I went back there for dinner. Their tasty and crisp pizzas were about 35,000 rials and small drinks 3,000 rials.

People of Yazd were very friendly often saying hello to me on the streets. The ladies were also flirty. Iranian law requires them to wear headscarves (hejab) they do not need

to cover their faces. Actually most of them do not. Some wear black chadors but increasingly more of them dress in a less conservative way and wear colourful headscarves. This way it was easy for them to chat me up. Some were very funny. When I was walking in the old town with my guide, he was teasing me - "do they lurk at me or you, my friend?". I always replied that it was him. Two of them made an attempt to invite us for tea.

Physical contact between unmarried couples in public is forbidden. I was told that relationships often were kept secret from family to protect particularly the guy. I heard that inadequate boyfriends might be painfully discouraged or even permanently damaged by the girl's brothers.

Also young people tired with the religious regime abandon faith altogether, I also heard. They would want to change Iran or leave as they cannot live a lie like that.

In Yazd, I went to visit Afghani refugees. It was the family of my guide, Samin, who also worked at the Orient, the Oasis and the Silk Route hotels. The family was rather shy. Samin's brothers, 18 and 12, never said a

word to me, but I knew they did not speak any English. The family has lived in Yazd for a number of years.

Their compound was in the heart of the old town. I saw three rooms. The first one was like a hall, where the shoes were being kept. The second one, of the same size, was a living room, where the only piece of furniture was a small tv set, a carpet and a few cushions. The third room was the kitchen. I am not sure where the family slept. I know that Samin was sleeping at one of the hotels, where he often worked as a night porter. The compound had also a small yards, where Samin kept his huge Afghani chickens. They were huge! He had three large cocks as well. They must have been well over 2 feet tall and they knew it that they were big.

I was surprised that the bazaar was closing during the day, as if for a siesta. The old town was completely deserted then, like a ghost town. But I loved it that way too. It was mysterious. It was calm. There was no mistake that desert was just yards away.

Alcohol could be arranged in Yazd. However, I found out about it too late. Had I enquirer



just a couple if earlier, I might have been able to sample a local brew or wine. Apparently whisky was also possible. Somehow naively I thought that since booze was totally of limits in Iran, it would be impossible to get any. Surely prohibition has never been fully successful anywhere in the world. Why would therefore non-Muslims living in Iran want to abandon their indulgences? No, no, no.

It seemed that it was not that hard in Yazd to get one hands on some spirits. Many young guys I met had a number to a supplier, who could get things organised in no time. My problem was that I woke up to the idea a few minutes before midnight, and the supplier could not be bothered to take this late night order. Yet, he was very happy to deliver the goods for the next day. That did not work for me as I was leaving for Isfahan.

I was lucky in Yazd to experience a mighty thunderstorm with multiple dramatic lightning. Locals told me that rain and storms did not happen often in the region. It only rained for a short while but the lightning and the growls of thunder lingered

for a few hours. The sky was dark grey, so some of my pictures came out dramatic rather than postcard pretty.

I was asked to give advice how to improve tourism and general tourist experiences in Iran. I said:

- make sure it is possible to book transport and accommodation from abroad;
- provide better transport links between IKA airport and Teheran, taxis would be also fine;
- provide more English indicators for airline offices at all terminals of the domestic airports;
- advertise abroad how beautiful Iran is and how safe it is to travel there.

I was told that the British were being watched and listened to by undercover government officers disguised as guides (provided free by tourism agencies) or friends met on the street, who wanted to practice English. Allegedly, hotel managers had to co-operate and provide access to hotel rooms so listening bugs could be

installed and luggage searched. I am not sure how much of it was true or fantasy, but on several occasions I was approached in the street and asked whether I was British. Negative response resulted in the local disappearing immediately, although they could have practised their English with me, too!

The coach driver, who took me from Yazd to Isfahan, dressed like John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever. He had tight pants expanding at the shoe level, shoes on hills, and tight fitting shirt. He even greased his hair and walked like Travolta. What a character!

Isfahan

Esfahan (or Isfahan), one of world's most beautiful cities, home to Earth's second largest collection of Islam's most remarkable and fabulous architecture, dazzles and overwhelms. It has been an urban masterpiece of Central Asia since ancient Persian times and further grew into Islam's

most precious place at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and now there are no ordinary words capable of adequately describing this city. It's mosques are amongst the beautiful on the planet and its bridges are unique and fantastic!

Yet, the city did not impress me immediately. There were a number of reasons.

If I were to give a title to the chapter on Isfahan, it would have to be 'you're not welcome!'. The problem was the lack of availability at hotels. After calling 15 hotels and visiting three, none of which would give me a room, I became concerned that I would have to leave the city on an overnight train to Teheran. That was not easy either. That night even the train was full! What does one do in situation like that?

I had to stay at the Ghasr Hotel, overpaying painfully. The only room available was a suite, complete with a kitchen. I was paying 750,000 rials for something I really didn't need. But there were no hotel rooms in the entire Isfahan it seemed. My fears before going to Iran realised completely. No seats available on airplanes and no hotels.

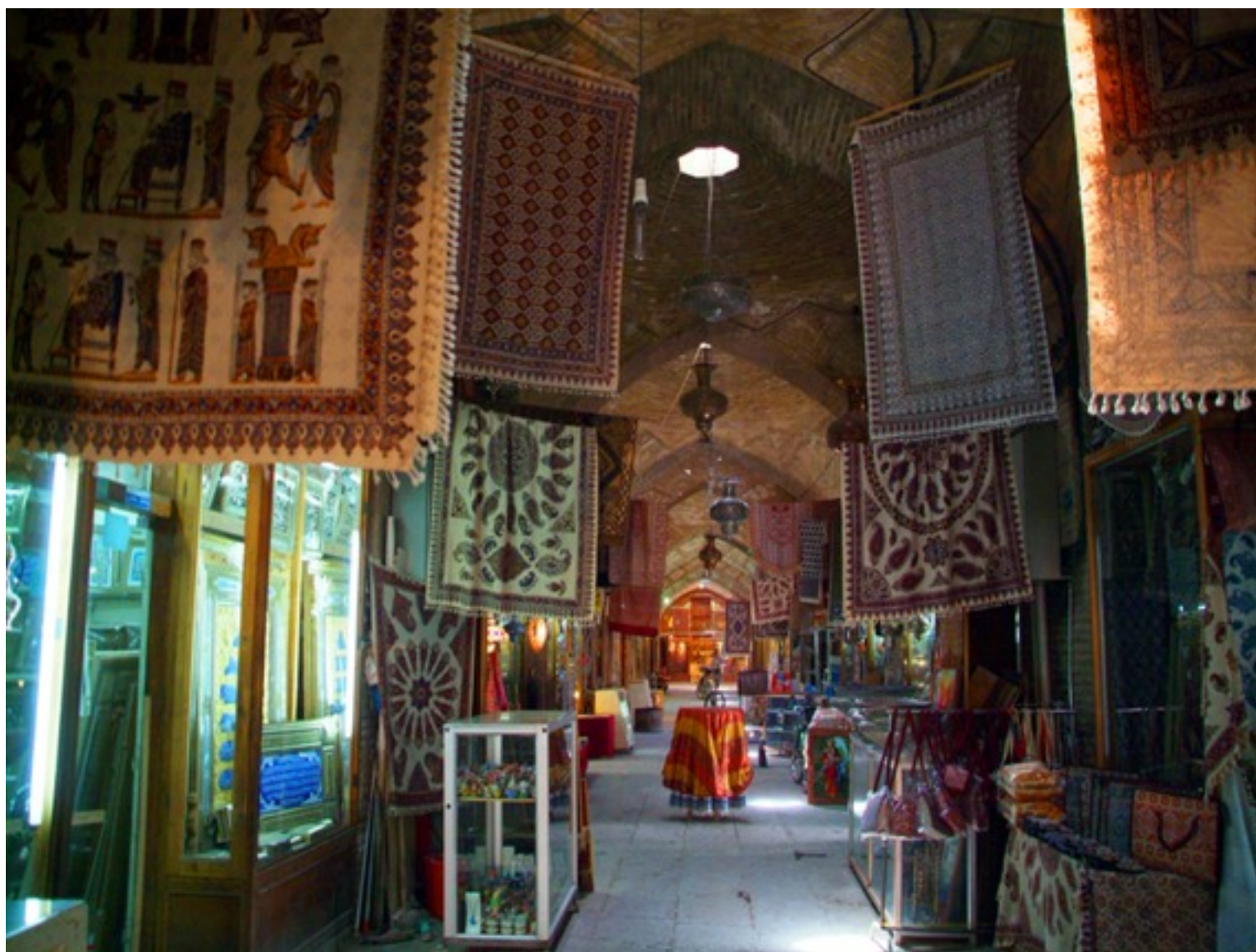
I did want to change it for something less extravagant but that was again impossible. At Sepahsn Hotel they also had only a suite available that would sleep five. They quoted me 660,000 rials for it. It was better than the Ghasr but still a bit too much - I really didn't need five beds for myself!

It definitely shows that Isfahan must have once been a great city. Perhaps the grandest one on Earth. Yet today, it is terribly crowded, paralysed by traffic and ... dirty.

Traffic, traffic, traffic! Wow! Such a nice, it seemed, city and experience of it so badly ruined by the traffic. It most definitely reminded me of the road conditions in Vietnam. If a pedestrian decided to stand at a pedestrian crossing and wait for cars to stop and let them cross, one would stand there for days and eventually die of hunger or, with a bit of luck, of sunstroke and extreme dehydration. The trick was of course to just enter the flow of traffic and keep crossing. The drivers would get annoyed with that honking viciously but not more annoyed that the pedestrians who have to resort to risking their lives just to cross to the other side of the street in the

time of peace. The pedestrians had no pedestrian zones anywhere in Isfahan. The pavements, squares and even bazaars were infested with speeding motorbikes and racing bicycles. What kind of game was that? 'Chase a pedestrian until turd comes out'?

My favourite spot in the city was most definitely the Jameh Mosque. Its architectural wonder was overwhelming. Inside it was free from plaster so it was possible to see the genius of the construction and design. The main court had four portals (iwans), each diametrically different from another. All was meticulously decorated with colourful tiles, many of which cited Quran. Apparently this was the largest mosque in the Islamic world (not sure how the one in Mecca compares) and one of the oldest. Anyway, it was one of the finest I had ever seen. I really struggle to find adequate words to describe it. The attention to detail on every tile of the iwans, the combination of different styles used to differentiate the portals from one another, the perfection of the bricks used to create the fabulously proportionate arches, domes and columns... Eh!





The Imam Square, which also operated a different name, was superb. Its harmony was slightly disturbed by allowing traffic to pass through it and some construction work when I visited. However, it was so large that it housed a track for horse cart riding, a large pool with fountains, and small trees offering shade and converting parts of the square into small parks. Interestingly, the two storey building surrounding the square and hiding a bazaar underneath, was not fully utilised. The ground floor was converted into multiple shops selling sweets or handicraft. The second floor could have been converted into cafes, restaurants or even perhaps art galleries.

The square boasting the Imam Mosque, the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque and Ali Qapu Palace looked splendid at any part of the day, and rather lovely at night when the little lights were turned on the ground and the mosques were skilfully illuminated. In the evening, hundreds of Isfahanis flocked to the square to relax, chat and eat ice-cream. It was

great that the square was loved by the locals as much as by the visitors. I also tried the ice-cream despite my cold. It was not different that the soft ice-cream sold in Europe.

When I finally got to the Imam Square in one piece, I met two guys who wanted to speak English and one who wanted to practice his German. I quickly got tired of German as mine is not that great, but he quickly found a native Bavarian, so I did not have to oblige anymore.

According to them the bed time for all of the Isfahanis was about 9:30 pm, almost as if there was a curfew. Subconsciously I wanted to disbelieve that. I asked for clarification probably too many times but they were consistent with their replies. Fortunately, a third guy, Ibrahim, joined us and said that if I wanted to go out, he could take me. I suggested that we could take some tea at the teashop by the Si-o-se Pol bridge. He was very happy to do that.

Foreigners were a scarce resource in Iran but every local seemed to want to talk to one. Ibrahim had a motorbike, which was very convenient I thought initially. Yet, as soon as we hit the traffic, I remembered that I didn't have a helmet, that no-one cared about adhering to the highway code (whether there in fact was one in Iran!), and that my travel insurance was unlikely to be valid in Iran. And then I was very pleased with myself how indeed brave I was. After ten very hair rising situations, I stopped counting how many lives I might have had in that game. Because it did seem like an unreal thing to be doing.

Anyway, it turned out that 9:30 pm was probably just the closing time of two Isfahanis of the entire population. By 11:30 pm the teashops were still full of people drinking tea and eating sugar. Furthermore both bridges I visited that night had an artistic programme on offer. The Khaju bridge was used as a background scenography for singing on the southern

bank, and the Si-o-se Pol bridge was housing samples of Iranian bagpipe music. Both events were free. The teashop at the second bridge was excellent! Unfortunately tea had to be drunk from plastic cups but the ambiance was superb.

The bridges of Isfahan were lovely. Some of which were really old, and some very long and doubling for dams. My favourite were Si-o-se Pol (33 arches bridge) and Khaju Bridge with its arched gallery. Both nicely illuminated at night.

The only tea shop to rival the location was the one on the top of the bazaar with the view over Imam Square, called Gheysarieh Tea Room.

Locals guys came to smoke sheesha (ladies don't do that). Out of eight, who surrounded me with their water pipes (each had his own) only one could speak some English. I gave way to two of them who joined my table, as they wanted to sit together with rest at the adjacent table. I was rewarded with an amusing company, peculiar conversation and a few sucks of the

sheesha. Plus the view of the square gradually turning on its night lighting was incredible.

Chehel Sotun Palace, one of the three imperial palaces in the Imam Square area, otherwise known as forty columns palace, was a magnificent place. Forty columns? Well, twenty real ones and twenty reflected in the pond. The painted walls inside were painted all over some representing lost and won battles. The tearoom in the park was full of young Teherani girls, who were not shy to flirt with me. One of them offered me ice-cream, but since I had a cold I had to refuse.

I found the Armenian Quarter very interesting. The cathedral was not huge but was utterly interesting for its painted walls inside. One of the walls, above the entrance (or perhaps intended for worshippers exiting the temple) depicted three layers of life - the Earth, Heaven and Hell. Some scenes were very dramatic. I liked the Death playing with its weapon in the right end of the Earth layer. I have to admit that Heaven was not portrayed very flatteringly. It showed souls

sitting on clouds in a terribly well organised manner. It did not look like anyone was having fun there.

The Christian Vank Cathedral in the Armenian Quarter was superb. Unfortunately it wasn't possible to take photos inside. The walls and ceiling were painted all over one of the walls above the entry showed three layers of life: Earth, Heaven and Hell. Very colourful (directly and metaphorically) depiction indeed. The adjacent museum showed religious artefacts, films about Armenian genocide executed by Turkey in 1915, and the smallest book in the world.

The Golbahar Bazaar leading from Imam Sq all the way to Jameh Mosque was a maze, whose alleys were packed with shops selling absolutely everything. The shops immediate to the square concentrated at souvenirs.

Medreseh-ye Chahar Bagh, which was off limits for Iranians, who did not study there but open for foreigners at the price of 30,000 rials, impressed me, too. It was well proportioned, colourful and green - trees inside created a micro park.





Hakim Mosque, inside bazaar south-west of the Imam Square, was surprisingly large and located unexpectedly off the main routes, it seemed.

At the far end of Isfahan the bike got a flat tire and I could forget getting to my hotel on time to check out and find an alternative. The repair took about 20 minutes. But the shop must have screwed it up as the punter came back as we entered the Imam Square. By then I gave up going to the hotel at all and just chill instead.

I soon found myself being chatted up by female students. A couple of them were studying art and others literature and French, who came for a visit to the first two. The gals were very attractive, inquisitive, talkative and rather forward thinking. They were definitely not shy. They approached me when I was taking a few shots of the Imam Mosque asking if they could have a photo with me. They obviously asked me about my reasons of coming to Iran and what I thought about their country. Some of the questions were tricky. I was not quite sure what to answer regarding the hajab. All of

the wore make up and I the most accurate description of their conduct would be 'slightly naughty'. I absolutely adored that and I did love all the attention.

The Imam Square was also infested with schoolboys on assignment. Not so much infested I guess but their presence was very noticeable. The young lads' task was to talk to foreigners and ask them to write something about Isfahan. They were adorable. They only knew few words in English (I'm not sure what other language they might have been using) and looked straight into the eyes not taking 'no' for an answer. I could not resist that remarkable stare and I did not really want to either.

None of my clarification questions worked and I had to think of something about Isfahan fast and note it down in plain English. Totally improvising but managed to create a page with a few sentences in capital letters. I will never forget their satisfied faces when I finished. I don't think I have seen more proud and happy ten year olds before. They giggled a lot when I read it back to them.

I so didn't want to leave Isfahan. I could spend all day around the Imam Square watching people, staring at the genius of the square's creation. The tearoom at the top of the bazaar was incomparable for location. It was so easy to talk to people. The students were so eager to talk to me.

As I was staying at a nice hotel in the centre in a suite. So, when the time came to get ready to transfer to Teheran for the last leg of the holiday, I could not get out of bed! My original plan was to leave on a 9 am bus. Eventually, I only checked out at 10:30 am. I was lucky to catch a bus for the capital that was to leave at 10:30 but was still there at 10:55 and I managed to hop on in a literally last second. It was definitely the least upkept Volvo coach I was on in Iran. Well, to be fair it was the oldest and the other two were Scania. Anyway, it was still good and the driver kept the speed at the maximum foreseen by the factory. The speedometer was happily resting at the 120 km/h mark. I was the only tourist on the coach so I received a lot attention from both the driver and the onboard personnel (one guy, who seemed to be mentally disadvantaged).

For some strange reason the coach stopped 2km from Qom for about 30 minutes. I didn't enjoy that break. I'd always prefer to get to my destination as soon as possible, so I have time at the destination for visiting, exploring, etc.

Polish composer Preissner's music was used often on commercials, particularly the music he'd written for the film trilogy 'Three Colours. Blue. White. Red' by Polish director Kieslowski. The piece that was used for the Ode to Europe in the Blue film was often used. These commercials were run both on radio and on television, but for the first time, I heard on the coach and I could not believe it. Well, to be more accurate - I could believe it but I did not expect it.

teheran

The road from the IKA airport was a modern motorway with three or four lanes in each

direction. The mighty mountains over Teheran kept looming from behind the haze (smog?) in the north. They looked absolutely massive! The sun was rising right beside them creating an unforgettable picture. The taxi driver played Persian music adding to the ambiance. I was slightly unhappy with my sense of smell, though. His car smelt of something unidentified but unpleasant.

On the way to the domestic airport, I passed relatively close to the TV tower and very close to the famous arch, which has now become .

I finally skipped Bam as it was still a total ruin I heard from travellers, and I stayed an extra day in Yazd for the company and relaxing. Similarly with Isfahan. I saw everything there was really to see in half a day, and could have moved on, but having met great people I stayed for socialising. So, when I made plans for the final stages of the holiday, I realised that it would probably best to soak the atmosphere of the country, chatting to the people, relax, take it easy

and only come to Tehran in the very last minute, enough to be able to make it for my flight back to London. I was leaving on Saturday morning, although I really regret now that I did not extend my holiday for an extra two days. I had a valid visa for it and enough cash to stay another two weeks. For Iran was such a good value.

On Friday everything was closed in Tehran, including restaurants. My first attempt to find accommodation at the Naderi Hotel was unsuccessful. I had more luck with the New Naderi Hotel across the road. I also dined there. Weather was not too bad for sightseeing but I felt a little lethargic after the six hour coach ride. I could not decide what to do with the few hours I had left in the country. I tried using the Internet however on Fridays that was not possible. I speculated for a while regarding taking a taxi ride to the Azadi Monument, Tehran's probably the most recognisable structure. I had seen it when I landed in Iran and used the domestic airport. It is just at the junction near the terminals.





I stayed next to the British Embassy, a nor very attractive area of the capital. This put me off any sightseeing. I went for a short stroll looking for a teahouse or an Internet cafe and I did not like the town. The day was coming to an end anyway, and since I had to get up early for the flight back home, I was thinking that perhaps it would be a good idea to retire early. It felt like an old man would do such a thing and not the party animal like me, yet everything was indeed closed and night clubs simply did not exist in the country.

PEOPLE

This holiday in Iran was great for people meeting. Not only were the Iranians exceptionally friendly, approachable, talkative and flirting, but also for the first time I met the Afghans and the Kurds.

In Yazd, where I met the Afghans, it was them, who contributed to my stay in the

town becoming unforgettable. Samin, who took me around, was determined to make sure my stay was enjoyable and that I would see as much as possible.

The Kurds I met at the bridge in Isfahan, were a mechanic, metallurgy technician and a computer specialist, who was also the Kurdish Arnold Schwarzenegger. He was showing off his biceps, which were in fact massive, and allegedly few millimetres shy off the Arnold's size. I have not met Kurds before. They were really funny and surprisingly patriotic about Iran. They bought me litres of tea and I could chat to them for hours and hours. There were various subjects, some of which considered the war with the US and the production of the nuclear weapon in Iran. But first of all they were genuine and witty.

I was surprised to meet a lot of random women in Iran, who wanted to chat and socialise. Such thing had never happened to me in an Islamic world. I always had to be satisfied by the company of men. I do not want to discriminate though.

LAST DAY

I would like to make it official that I would want to come back to Iran as soon as practical. The country is wonderful and the people are fantastic. Yazd being the best place to relax, drink tea and wander around mud-brick old town. And Isfahan being the best time to socialise with not only the Iranians, but also the Kurds and other nationals from the area.

I just do not feel like I have spent enough time in the country to fully appreciate its full potential, to meet and mingle with the locals and soak the atmosphere. Yet, the visit to Iran was close to a perfect holiday.

the end

All names in this report are true and the story should be entirely accurate. All photographs were taken by the author during the trip. All rights reserved.