

## FREDERICK TRAVELER GETS WARM WELCOME IN IRAN

by

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When I told my family and friends last year that I was going to Iran inevitably the first question was "Why?" and then "Isn't it dangerous?" I generally mumbled something like "I've not been there and I want to see it." and about Iran's long history and many archeological sites as the Persian Empire. Besides, I had read that Geographic Expeditions, the trip organizer, had been taking American groups there since 1993 and Distant Horizons since 1997-and probably others that I don't know about- so it couldn't be very dangerous. But mostly I wanted to see for myself if Iran really is populated by religious extremists and terrorists, or if restrictions on tourism are truly being relaxed and it's a viable tourist destination.

About six weeks before scheduled departure there were student demonstrations in Tehran and other cities across Iran calling for greater democracy. In a few instances clashes with police were violent. The government, while officially condemning the police action, accused the CIA of fermenting the demonstrations. Just days before leaving The Washington Post had two short reports about a group of American college students suddenly leaving Iran under "sensitive" circumstance. And I had a copy of the US State Department's information sheet warning US citizens against travel in Iran. Gary Wintz, our trip leader, said that it was more important than ever to respect Iran's cultural sensitivities, to do all possible to avoid offending anyone, and to be discreet when talking about recent events or politics. So it was with some trepidation that I joined six Americans, an Australian, a Dane, and Sayid Haji Hadi, our Iranian guide, for the start of a three week 2500 mile cultural and photographic bus trip.

Our itinerary began in Tehran and then northwest with visits to the tombs of Esther and Mordecai, east along the shores of the Caspian Sea with resort towns said to once rival the Riviera, through the great deserts of the southwest with caravansaries to medieval ruins at Kerman, Mahan and Bam, north through the Zoroastrian center of Yazd to Shiraz and the archeological masterpieces of Persepolis and Pasargadae, culminating in legendary Isfahan. The journey emphasized how large Iran is and how much of the country is barren, dirt-colored mountains. There are oases and orchards and we were told that Iran is beautiful in the Spring when the hills are green and the flowers and trees are in bloom.

I saw no recognizable terrorists, was warmly welcomed by the people on the street and in the shops and hotels, explored many mosques with scads of Islamic clerics who didn't seem foreboding, hardly ever saw a policeman except at the ubiquitous road check points and those typically were young men in neatly pressed uniforms who were quite polite and helpful. One was a passenger in our bus for an afternoon after we offered him a ride from one of the check points to his village which was on our route. People of all ages went out of their way to say "What country are you from?" and then "Welcome to our country." Many of the younger people spoke English as it is required in the schools. One evening

there was a wedding feast at the hotel where we stayed. One of our ladies peeked into the room where the ladies apparently were having fun, as opposed to the room where the men were sitting around looking at each other. She was invited in. The next day Sharon reported that she was treated royally, almost everyone chatted with her and many posed for pictures, there was dancing and singing, lots of makeup, and short skirts.

Although Iran is relaxing some of its controls on tourists Americans are still a scarce commodity. We were told by a Fox television crew in Isfahan that we were then the only Americans in the country. We created quite a stir in some of the small villages which rarely see a tour bus, much less Americans. Japanese, European and Australian tourists are relatively common in the cities, and the major European airlines fly into Iran. Almost without exception, people agreed to be photographed-except in the mosques- and frequently they asked us to be in photographs with them. In the villages we frequently were invited into homes for conversation and tea. Twice we were treated to home-made wine, which apparently is permissible.

But every issue of the English language Tehran Times that I saw contained anti-American articles and editorials. There are still a few "Down With the USA" sign, the most offensive on the side of an eight-story building where the stars are replaced with skulls and the red stripes by raining down missals. We were warned not to take photographs of anything military and especially not of the old US Embassy where almost a generation ago 52 Americans were held hostage for 444 days and some say influenced Nixon's presidential election. At Desert 1, the landing site for President Carter's ill-fated attempt to rescue the embassy hostages, there were signs clearly demonizing the USA. When we arrived in Mashhad we learned that earlier in the day a bomb had exploded near the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza that we were to visit the next day. Blame was placed on "terrorists" with CIA backing for the two deaths and 10 injuries.

There is a strict code of behavior with emphasis on modesty. Men should dress modestly and no shorts. Gary Wintz said that when he was last in Iran only long sleeved shirts were permitted; this is no longer true. Women must wear a scarf covering their hair and neck, and a loose, opaque cloak or other covering that should reach below the knees and hide all curves. Chadors, the black cloak that conservative Moslem women wear, are required in certain places, such as mosques. Iranian law simply states that only hands and face of women may show. This certainly restricts exercise and coed swimming. I only saw one lady jogging and she was in full regalia. I was not close enough to determine her nationality, but I think she was Iranian. The three ladies in our group were prepared and willingly complied but there was some mumbling in the September desert heat.

Iranian women, however, are slowly and carefully pushing for reforms. They venture out alone, drive cars, and hold jobs. En masse, draped in their chadors, they appear somber. Up close the women are friendly, helpful and curious about Americans. In the mosques, when they adjusted our ladies' hair coverings, I could see warm smiles and some laughter. Often their chadors are gray, white or pastel instead of solid black. There was hennaed hair, lipstick, heavy eye makeup, painted toe nails, perfume, and a lot of scarves were pushed back exposing lots of hair. In the larger cities skin tight jeans with loose

outer coverings that frequently ended at or above the knees, and stylish shoes were not unusual among the 20 to 30 year old females.

From my experiences, Iran is for experienced travelers but not for tourists. Supposedly we were in the care of the best tour company in Iran, yet the morning of our departure from Tehran our bus "burned out its motor" so we were delayed about two hours while a replacement was found. About a week later in the mountains between Sanandaj and Maragheh our driver stopped as the bus suddenly had no brakes Hadi hitchhiked to the nearest town and, although it was Friday in a Muslim country, he hired a minibus getting us to our hotel quite late that evening....we lost a day of sightseeing sitting by the side of the road. Another day we spent the afternoon riding at about 30 miles per hour due to a clogged gas line...so we again arrived at our late at our hotel and only after our drivers convinced the police at a road check point that the mandatory speedometer records from our bus were not falsified. At our hotels twice we had no hot water; one evening we had no water for almost three hours, and sometimes the air conditioning was inadequate, although we supposedly were in first rate hotels. There were some good properties, for example a previous Hyatt Regency on the Caspian Coast, but even they needed refurbishing.

There are favorite memories; late afternoon in a Tabriz candy store where four generations of a family shared their purchase of chocolates and nuts with us, asked us about America and our impressions of Iran and the people. We'd been told not to shake hands, embrace or touch women in public, but the ladies of this family all wanted to shake our hands. Soon the shop keepers joined in the conversation and commerce ceased for maybe 15 minutes. This has never happened to me in any of the other nearly 100 countries that I have visited. Also in Tabriz, in the evening, we went to an amusement park where ladies in chadors, laughing and chattering, were riding the big bumpy slide, swinging rockets, roller coasters, and bumper cars. Finally, in Maragehe there was a throng of teen-aged girls laughing, chatting, and maybe even flirting, with us from behind their school fence. These are not scenes that I'd expect in a terrorist or religiously oppressed country.

Since returning home I have read that two students identified as the leaders of the July demonstrations have been found guilty of some atrocity against the Koran...which typically carries the death penalty. There are reports the conservatives are consolidating forces for the February 2000 election in hopes of overthrowing the current moderate government. More recently 400 nominees, mostly reform candidates, were disqualified by a hard-line electoral supervisory council. It will be interesting to see what fate holds for the future for Iran.