

by Ihab Zaki

In more than twenty five years of traveling, this was one of the most thrilling tours I've ever experienced. The country of Afghanistan has been severely ravaged by strife for as long as I remember. I'd been longing to make this trip but honestly, right up to the moment I boarded the plane, I must admit that there were times when I wondered if I was making the right decision because of how many times people who learned of my adventure questioned my sanity. Happily the trip went as beautifully as I anticipated and I indeed fell in love with Afghanistan.



I always had the idea that it would be fascinating to visit one of the most talked about places on the planet; a place where tourists really don't get to. In 12th century Spice Route, Afghanistan was an important stop to visit the shrine of Imam Ali, even Genghis Khan felt it was worth a visit or a razing. If you think about it, Afghanistan hasn't been as safe as it is now, for the past decade, and even before that it may have been since the 50's that it was a place that outsiders could visit.

Much to my surprise, I found that Kabul is not the war-ravaged city of rubble that I expected it to be. It is actually a massive construction zone, though gray but sprawling city divided by the polluted Kabul River in a valley surrounded by the Hindu Kush Mountains. Population is now estimated at five million. The city was wasted in 1982 by the mujahidin and it went from bad to worse after the American bombardment of the Taliban in 2001. A few years back, I had heard that half the buildings were shot up and the edge of the airport runway was littered with smashed fuselages and airport buses. Nowadays, many newer buildings of glass concrete and rebar, somewhat incongruous with the old mud brick and stone architecture are springing up everywhere. The newspapers and TV never tell us how normal life runs here...well, normal for Afghans of course! Like many cities, traffic is a gridlock blob of cars and rickety donkey and horse carts. Chaos reigns. You can't help but notice the girls, wearing uniforms of skinny black trousers, knee-length coats and white head scarves pour out of schools looking hopeful. They gather around street vendors and small shops buying after-school treats.

During Taliban times, girls' education was forbidden. Malala's tale of tragedy reminds us of the horrible times of Taliban regime. One of the things you immediately observe in Kabul is the vibrant explosion of brand new apartment buildings, offices, shopping malls and gaudy looking glitzy "Vegas-style" wedding places. Secondly, you can't escape realizing how much security is in and around Kabul. These include private security, the local police, the Afghan Army and ISAF (International Armed Response Forces). The army and ISAF drive around in tandem armored vehicles.

There were barriers and security guards at either end of the street where we stayed in West Kabul. Across from our hotel was an international school, as well as private homes. Almost every place I entered had security staff checking you in and out with a thorough individual inspection that was as good as at any airport. Even the Kabul Coffee shop had two metal gates at least six feet tall! Security is on everyone's minds, and it is comforting to see that they take it seriously to keep civilians safe. The one positive thing was that, unlike Yemen, the guns I saw in Afghanistan were all in the hands of the uniformed guys, not the tribesmen. Entering and exiting our delightful hotel was like crossing into an army barrack with metal gates and x-ray machines. It reminded us all that we are still in an unsettled country.



Afghans are very polite people and whenever asked about their opinion, the response was always a sweep of one arm and a variation of: "look around you, none of what you see could have been possible without America". Interestingly but probably understandably, the streets while full of Afghans, in all shapes, colors, sexes, sizes, and manner of dress were devoid of any Westerners.

You can see a handful of Westerners on the loose at the Kabul Cafe and at several upscale shops. On the other hand, we (there were 14 of us on the tour) went about with our guides and escorts, armed with their cell phones, in an unmarked reliable and air-conditioned convoy of 3 vans. All about is the bustle of human activity: men in various head coverings with safari vests or suit jackets over their shalwar keemiz and women in burkas. My guess is that most Afghani women wear the blue burkas whenever they venture out of their homes except for a few more modern looking ladies still modestly dressed and mostly in Kabul.

We visited most of the suggested sights: Darulamen Palace that was a shell of the old Royal Palace, across the street from the Kabul Museum. Tragically, much of the museum's collections had been decimated by both the mujahidin and the Taliban. Our group shopped on Chicken Street one morning, a popular spot for Afghanistan's tourists. It features all kinds of handicrafts. We also wandered about Babur's Gardens, a 16th century formal park created by the first Mughal Emperor with a small, restored white marble mosque.



The one free day we had, some of us wandered in the old city a bit, visiting Bala Hissar, the old British Fort, and the British Cemetery where Aurel Stein, a Central Asian archaeologist, is buried. At the cemetery, we saw memorial plaques for Americans, Germans and Brits recently killed in military operations/missions in Afghanistan. The caretaker, who maintained the cemetery for 28 years, was delighted to show us around.

One day we drove to the beautiful and enigmatic Panjshir Valley, the resting place of Ahmed Shah Massoud, whose legend and spiritual legacy still live on in the hearts and minds of his fellow countrymen. We drove through several small villages as well as scattered Russian tanks and armored

vehicles that still dot the fields. The countryside was lovely as we traveled along the gushing river that led us to Massoud's grave. He was the Tajik head of the Northern Alliance who was assassinated by Al-Qaeda. At the grave is a memorial with words by his son and a Colonel Pike, USMC, extolling him and his life.

The sandstone cliffs of Afghanistan's Bamyan province are most famous for the giant 6th century Buddha statues carved out of the rock that were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. In spite of the tragic loss of the large Buddha statues, Bamyan still has a lot to offer. The 2 niches that remain are still fascinating to look at and one can still climb the stairs within to explore some of the scattered caves on the way up. The monks who created them also dug out numerous caves in the Bamyan valley. Originally used for meditation and retreat, some of these caves are now home to around 700 Afghan families who have no land and can't afford conventional housing. Hundreds of caves in the Bamyan cliffs form part of the UNESCO World Heritage site.



Bamyan's climate is much nicer and cooler than the rest of Afghanistan being at almost 7000 feet above sea level. The valleys are alive with villagers and the atmosphere is much more relaxed than the rest of the country, and even burkas are rarely spotted there. The region is primarily populated by the Shiite Afghans named the Hazaras.

Not far from Bamyan, are the fabled turquoise lakes of Band-e Amir whose spectacular blue waters are even more surreal and striking than their prolific photos suggest. The mineral rich water results in calcified dams that create the lakes in much the same way as the pools of Pamukkale in Turkey but on a grander scale! The startling color of the lakes contrasting the barren, dusty, dun colored mountains and cliffs is amazing. The day was spent wandering and exploring and enjoying a picnic lunch and paddleboats in the icy waters.

The jewel of Mazar-i-Sharif is the shrine of Hazrat Ali, also known as the Blue Mosque – which is one of the most reputed burial places of Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin and son-in law of Prophet Muhammad. This Mosque is much much more beautiful than any I seen in Iran, Turkey, Iraq or Azerbaijan (amongst other Islamic countries). I checked it out day and night and also listened to the call to prayer. The site includes a series of five separate buildings, with the Shrine of Hazrat Ali being in the center and the mosque at the western end. The site is surrounded by gardens and paths including an area with white pigeons. The population of Mazar-i-Sharif is a mix of ethnic Hazara, Pashtun, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek, combined to establish Afghanistan fourth largest city. For connoisseurs of carpets, Mazar-i-Sharif is a paradise to buy rugs for a great price.



Compared with neighboring countries such as Uzbekistan or Iran where prices are nowadays sky high, Afghanistan, on the other hand, has very affordable prices for carpets. In Mazar-i-Sharif I took the opportunity to buy a beautiful carpet and lapis jewelry for my wife.

Near Mazr is the fabled city of Balkh... also known as Bacteria to the Greeks. It was the birthplace of Zoraster and Rumi, and both Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan passed through here. It is home to the 9th-century No Gumbad Mosque (nine columns), the oldest Mosque in Afghanistan and one of the earliest Mosques of Islam. The walls of Alexander the Great's citadel are still visible here, and the town has some Timurid ruins as well in the central park. I couldn't help but feel very nostalgic while walking through the town for how important this site is for human history and for how important this magnificent country has been for history.



Now after I left this amazing country, I had many flashing memories ...I kept reminiscing about the heat and the dust, about the striking tiles on the Mosque at Mazar-i-Sharif, about the serenity and peacefulness of Bamyán town and the imposing colossal niches of Buddha, about all the young Afghans who were so happy albeit a bit perplexed when they met us as to why on earth we come to their homeland as tourists, about the majestic citadel of Herat, about the many antique shops and rug places we stopped at, about the images of the military and landmines museum in Kabul that depicted though in rudimentary way the atrocities that befell the people of Afghanistan for so many decades and their struggle for independence and about the multitude of burkas we saw in all the different places, women that look like walking prison cells.

I still recall one day when we stopped for a bite to eat at a rest stop as we traveled from one place to the next. There were men with thick beards and gray cloaks sitting in circles, scooping up kidney beans and rice with warm flat bread in their right hand, for there was no silverware, and hungrily chowing down. Their faces were leathered, evidence of years of toil under the sun and the scars of war, but through crooked, rotted, and misshapen teeth peaked smiles and laughter. A handful of tea kettles sat over the stove, sending up puffs of smoke as they heated. There were no women in sight. In a country still embroiled in conflict this roadside restaurant was eerily calm. We were offered chicken kabobs on a skewer, blackened over the fire and served with the same kidney beans and fried potatoes those others in the room were enjoying. As humans we all have the same needs and we surely also want the same futures for our kids.



My entire journey through this country was a most enlightening one. Most common Afghans do not know life outside of war and they long for the normalcy that we take for granted. It truly makes you appreciate your country and your own way of life.