

by Ihab Zaki (April 2014)

Maybe it is me!!! Maybe I have this weak soft spot for Iran... No other destination in the world touches my soul that deeply and I believe a spell was cast on me when I first visited in 1999 that never waned. Last time I traveled to this alluring nation was for a very short 2 days in October 2008 crossing at the Armenian border. This year, I had the opportunity to spend a full week in country and it reinforced my obsession for this marvelous ancient wonder. Since my return, I have been subjecting my coworkers to the melodious Iranian songs that transport me back. Anyhow, I am not here to dwell on my emotional fixation of that great country but to tell you my impressions and of what I learned in my travels. I accompanied a delightful group of 14 wonderfully open-minded, flexible, pleasant, courteous travelers, many of whom were alumni of Spiekermann Travel and some of them alumni of past Iran trips! The tour was led by the eminent archaeologist Professor Denise Schmandt-Besserat, who kept us, engaged with daily mini-lectures that she gave on long drives. Material presented ranged from fascinating classical subjects to some very entertaining ones such as pistachios, palm trees, jinn, and jewelry.



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I made the decision that this year was the ideal time for me to revisit Iran. I looked forward to seeing old friends, but my main focus was to finally meet face to face with the 2 local operators who have handled our Iran business since the mid 90's. I also wanted to see for myself whether the country is booming as I have heard or if that is just a rumor propagated by those who want to convince Americans to visit. Amazingly, it was very true and I would have never ever believed it unless I had seen it with my own eyes. Everywhere you go you encounter other tours, sometimes big sometimes small, of every nationality from every corner of the globe. Each day that we checked into our hotel we would see a stack of client files waiting to be processed! That is NOT the Iran I once knew and it is far from the place that I used to call the hidden gem, the undiscovered jewel of the ancient world! Of course the latest rapprochements in 2013 and 2014 between presidents Obama and Rouhani have made a major contribution to that boom along with the news of the potential lifting of some of the sanctions. The Iranians are thrilled to host all these visitors, many of whom are the spill over from neighboring nations blessed with archaeological wonders. Tourists' numbers have dropped dramatically in countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen making Iran the beneficiary of that pent-up demand. We in the travel industry suspect that within a couple of years, provided US/Iran relations keep improving,

that Iran will become the new tourist mecca that competes with Turkey. The dilemma however is that this new boom came very abruptly and the infrastructure is not yet ready. By that I mean the “tourist” one not the physical one. Infrastructure is actually superb and on a par with any highly developed western nation, but good hotels, enough beds, more restaurants and surely more guides are a necessity that they have to deal with swiftly. Luckily, being one of the first companies in the USA that began promoting Iran in the mid 1990’s has given me a great edge. Because of this early entry into the market I was able to master the ins and outs of the country and learn about what it has to offer. I also had the chance to grow long-lasting relationships with many amazing guides who still would give me priority in handling my business over other American companies. So we are bracing for a new era and rather than the usual one or two group departures per year I am already planning to launch 4 or 5 in 2015. Iran still requires for people that visit to be sponsored and handled by one of the few agencies who are allowed to host Americans but they are granted their visas in a timely manner.

My short journey this time started with a flight via Doha, Qatar another amazing place that I yearn to see and learn more about, as it is a destination we have sent many people to in the past few years. A true gem as far as Islamic architecture yet a very avant-garde city that manages to maintain the colorful authentic spirit of old Qatar. With its ample wealth it is building endless museums and artistic venues. It serves as a great stop over city on your way to anywhere in the region, be it Iran, Oman, Saudi Arabia, India or Sri Lanka. Anyhow, this is not the time to delve into Qatar, as I am here to talk about Iran.

After meeting my group in Tehran at the Hotel Laleh (the Intercontinental in its glorious days of the Shah), we shared dinner and they briefed me on the exciting things they had seen in the south the past 2 weeks. They talked about the marvels of Shiraz, Isfahan, Kashan, Yazd and Susa and the many Sassanian rock reliefs that they had seen. I remembered the Laleh from past visits, as having a slow but pleasant staff, tired looking rooms and a great lobby that reflects old opulence...and it hasn’t changed! Nowadays there are a couple of newer hotels and I went to inspect them and sure enough their rooms are much better though their common areas and reception are not as grand and impressive as the Laleh. So the verdict is that from now on, when the tour begins and ends in Tehran we will stay at the Laleh and at one of the newer places. This way we will give the guests the opportunity to experience both and we would appreciate hearing about which you prefer.

During the 20 days of this tour, my clients traversed immense mountain ranges, descended into high plateau deserts, crossed through fertile valleys and examined splendid rock formations. They traveled through lush forests, by farming land with rice patties, skirted lakes, passed close to rivers, saw dramatic waterfalls and explored fabled cities. You name it...Iran has it! A country of more than 630,000 square miles



(bigger than Germany, France and Italy combined) it cannot be covered entirely in such a short tour. The traveler during the journey can't help but be immersed in the stories and the magnificence of the Persian empires that were the greatest the world has known. Iran boasts 15 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and amazingly we covered about 12 of them. The group may have seen grand mosques and mausoleums, amazing ancient cities and impressive ruins but they all voted that one of the highlights of the trip was the unexpected interactions with the local people.

The next day after a fantastic breakfast we boarded our huge comfortable 45-seat bus (for only 16 of us) to head north towards the Caspian Sea. We left the hustle and bustle of chaotic and noisy Tehran and started the drive on a beautiful highway and passed many tea plantations before arriving at the town of Masuleh. At least 1000 years old, it is dotted with earth-colored houses built on top of each other against a mountainside so steep that one's house roof served double duty as another's patio. There are also quaint



small shops selling handmade artifacts, especially dolls and handbags. As we prepare our clients for the long drives, we also ensure that our vehicles are comfortable, safe and our drivers are topnotch and yes indeed we had two of the very best: courteous, always smiling, clean, very careful and extremely helpful to the guests. They took care every night after long drives to wash the windows and to clean the bus inside and out. The law requires 2 drivers for long tours in order to avoid exhaustion and to ensure the safety of the passengers. While one drove the other would pass among us refilling our teacups, offer snacks such as pistachios, fruits or cookies and empty our trash bags. Now that's service!

After several hours first ascending from Tehran to Masuleh and then descending from Masuleh to the Caspian Sea we arrived at Bandar Anzali port, a quiet idyllic spot for a calm night. Some could not resist dipping their feet into the waters which were soothing like a peaceful lake. We heard from our guide that in the season when it turns rough it can be so treacherous that all maritime routes are aborted as the waves can reach 20 feet high. What shall one have for dinner on the Caspian shore but the famous sturgeon fish made into kabab. It was superb and I just wished I could have a glass of chardonnay with it but alas this is an alcohol free country.

Next day we resumed the drive towards Tabriz but with a stop at one of the many UNESCO sites of Iran: Ardabil city, home to the beautiful mausoleum of Sheikh Safi el Din Ardabili. His shrine was home to the famous Ardebil Carpet that takes its name from the town of Ardabil in northwest Iran. Ardabil was the home to the shrine of the Sufi saint, Safi al-Din Ardabili, who died in 1334 (Sufism is Islamic mysticism). He was a Sufi leader who trained his followers in Islamic mystic practices. After his death, his following grew and his descendants became increasingly powerful. In 1501 one of his descendants, Shah Isma'il, seized power, united Iran, and established Shi'a Islam as the official religion. The dynasty he founded is known as the Safavids. Their rule, which lasted until 1722, was one of the most important periods for Islamic art, especially for textiles and for manuscripts. After the visit of the shrine, which is no longer home to the carpet as it is currently on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, we had ice cream and took the bus to continue the journey with a very interesting lecture by Denise about carpet making and designs & knots.

Passing some amazing topography we continued towards Tabriz, the jewel city of the Iranian province of east Azerbaijan. After having had its glorious era during the time of the Seljuk, it was sadly sacked by the Mongols in the 13th century and was further destroyed by a devastating earthquake in the 18th century. However, it still has managed to keep its charm and luster. Its bazaar, second in size to that of Aleppo (now sadly damaged and partially ruined by the fighting factions in Syria) has been listed as a UNESCO site. After visiting the famous Blue Mosque (not to be confused with that of Istanbul of course) which gets its name from the deep lapis blue tiles, we headed to the bazaar for some shopping. We ended our sightseeing excursion at the small but wealthy antiquities museum of Tabriz displaying a gamut of artifacts from the northwestern region of Iran.



Iran will throw more surprises at you than you were prepared for. What you experience when visiting Kandovan cave town is a place peculiarly similar to Turkey's Cappadocia yet so quiet and untouristy without the same commercial extravagance. Only an hour's drive from Tabriz, we began our day under rainy skies but when we arrived in Kandovan, it was just misting, giving the area a mystical look. Local history tells of inhabitants from nearby villages fleeing to these caves more than 700 years ago during the time of the Mongol invasion. The cone-like structures have remained homes ever since.



During our visit, the village was as alive as ever. Children used the caves to play hide and seek, fathers dragged stubborn mules laden with saddlebags in and about them, and mothers hung laundry on lines stretched from one peak to the next. At the base of the hill, vendors sold meters of surprisingly addictive pressed dried pomegranate and apricot sheets to unsuspecting travelers like us. The intriguing architecture of this village seems to defy all rules and travelers are usually fascinated by its incredible slopes and irreverent paths. Recently a hotel was built, inspired by and connected to the "style" of the village. The Rocky Hotel features beautiful cave interiors with very comfortable living spaces. We sat and had our tea break on the terrace of the hotel before we returned to Tabriz.



That afternoon we were urged by our astute guide to stroll in the "Health Park" next to the hotel which is a beautiful wide open green space with a lovely lake and a gazebo built by one of the Qajar kings in the 19th century. Today this park is a refuge for everyone in the city who wants to exercise and breathe clean air. We had many opportunities to interact with the locals and were amazed at the

friendliness of all those who stopped us to talk to ask about America and to take pictures with us. We marveled at the dedication of those people who were using all the free public equipment that the city provided for the people to exercise, men and women, a truly amazing place and a lovely experience for us.

Next morning we departed Tabriz to head towards Zanjan. We made a stop at a truly awe-inspiring site called Soltaniyeh, another UNESCO heritage site. The renowned writer, historian William Dalrymple notes that the Seljuk ruler Öljaitü intended Soltaniyeh to be "the largest and most magnificent city in the world" but that it "died with him" and is now "a deserted, crumbling spread of ruins. But the dome that still stands is the 3rd largest in the world after Aya Sofia's and the Florence Cathedral. The structure, erected from 1302 to 1312 AD, has the oldest double-shell dome in Iran. The Dome of Soltaniyeh paved the way for more daring Iranian-style cupola constructions in the Muslim world, such as the Taj Mahal. Much of its exterior decoration has been lost, but the interior retains superb mosaics, faience, and murals. People have described the architecture of the building as "anticipating the Taj Mahal."



The next morning we continued towards Tehran through more amazing landscapes arriving in time for lunch and had the afternoon at leisure for last minute shopping. Of course, I could not resist the call and so in my weakened state I went in search of some of the wool/silk pictorial carpets imitating the paintings of one of Iran's most famous contemporary artists: Mahmoud Farshchian and picked one with the colors that will match the inside of my house. I even had it framed with one of the most elaborate wooden frames I have ever seen. As I could not carry it, and did not want to face any obstacles upon entering the US due to the confusing and conflicting information about what the sanctions are for Iranian goods, I had it shipped. Plus the gallery accepts credit cards as they process the payment via their branch in Dubai, so it made my life easier. Before departing, our guide gave us the important statistics about the group covering a distance of 5,684Km equivalent to 3,477 miles in 20 days..quite amazing and worth every minute by consensus of everyone.



Iran is opening its doors and undoubtedly a wave of Americans will flood it eager to peek behind its mysterious veil! It is a magnificent country loaded with history, culture, friendly people and tradition of hospitality. I am more determined to be an ambassador to this upcoming destination. We are launching multiple trips for the next months and years and we invite you to join us.