

## 8 Iran--Glorious Past, Changing Future

Herat, Afghanistan, to Meshed, Iran (formerly Persia)  
Wednesday, April 7

The trotting horses pulling their jingling gharries woke us early. After packing the bus and eating breakfast, we lingered in the dining room over more cups of chai waiting for Neil and Brenda. We had waited over an hour when Graeme reluctantly decided to push on without them after 9:00. Neil knew where we would be staying in Gorgan, so hopefully they would catch up with us there. Janet had also made a decision; she would continue on with us.

Two hours of travel brought us to the Iranian border where we were somewhat surprised to see modern buildings indicating a more progressive society. A custom's official entered the bus, collected our passports and told us to bring all of our luggage into the custom's building. The bus detail set to work unloading the boot.

Entering the building, we came face to face with a large framed picture of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran.

Here we were also introduced, oddly enough, to the aroma of hashish, although we did not notice anyone smoking it. The border officials were young, good-looking and more personable than those at our past border crossings. They flirted with us girls as they asked rather nonchalantly if we were carrying hashish. Several showcases displaying pictures of discovered contraband inside cars and suitcases, were spaced around the large room cautioning would-be smugglers. Outside, we had noticed numerous impounded vehicles inside a large fenced area. Our bus was now being thoroughly searched. It was quite obvious that the Iranian government was out to catch every drug trafficker. The penalty for this crime here as well as in Turkey could be as severe as death.

In front of us in the customs' queue were several westerners looking harried and disheveled from the rigors of the road. Suspecting the long haired men of drug possession, the officials spent more time questioning them and searching their belongings. Possibly, due to our clean-cut appearance, we were detained just two hours and had only a couple of our suitcases searched.

With two loo stops along the way, we drove into the night arriving at our motel-camp complex in Meshed around 10:30. In this park-like setting, Graeme assigned us quarters telling some of us that we would have to double up. The facilities were in a separate building with plenty of new clean porcelain slabs and hot showers. Graeme gave us time to unload our gear and wash up before we went looking for a place to eat.

As Graeme drove us to an older part of town, our night "tour" of Meshed revealed circular intersections decorated with colored lights, reminding me of Christmastime in the States. He located an inexpensive restaurant in a rather stodgy neighborhood. From the street, we descended a long flight of stairs and entered a room where two men sat at a table eating rice with their fingers. On the gray wall above them hung a picture of the Shah.

Due to the late hour, the waiters quickly seated us at two long tables in the center of the room. Graeme ordered chelo kebab, the national dish, Pepsi and glasses for all of us. Immediately bottles of Pepsi and glasses were placed before us; but we asked the waiters for clean glasses as these were smudged and greasy. They reluctantly collected them, dipped them in what we thought was luke warm water and returned them to us. Still, we chose to drink from the bottles. Soon each of us was served a piping hot platter mounded with fluffy white rice and centered with a raw egg yoke and a generous dab of butter, followed by side dishes of skewered seasoned roast lamb. The meal was filling and delicious.

Back at the motel by midnight, some scurried to the hot showers while others removed mattresses from the beds, placed them on the floor and unrolled their sleeping bags on them. All was quiet by 1 A.M.

Meshed to Gorgan  
Thursday, April 8

A pristine morning greeted us as we converged on the facilities. The bus was packed by 9:00, but there was still no sign of Neil and Brenda. Graeme postponed our leaving until afternoon in the hope that our traveling companions would appear.

In the meantime, he drove us to a luxury hotel for breakfast. We tromped through the Persian lobby into a spacious high ceiled dining room with long linen-covered tables. A Japanese tour group sporting expensive cameras was already having breakfast. We too filled up on the proverbial hard boiled eggs, a white cheese called panir, a very good spongy breakfast bread or narn called barbary, and sangak, a leathery narn similar to what we had eaten before and plenty of chai. What we didn't eat, we packed away for lunch as this had become an easy way to stretch our cash. Another well established habit by now was leaving our thermoses on the tables for the waiters to fill with boiled water. The boiled water was preferable to water purified by tablets.

Driving on to a bank, we were impressed by the old and new architecture and the number of highrises in the city. It appeared that Meshed was busy and prospering. At the circular intersection, daylight now revealed flower gardens, some with statues. The predominance of American and European cars, and the smart tailored suits worn by businessmen also lent western flavor to this eastern city. Even some of the women, scarved in their head-to-toe

black chadors, revealed glimpses of western dress where this covering opened.

The chador appeared to be less confining than the Afghan burka, but also presented problems to the wearer. To hold the garment in place, the women either had to hold it or clench it in their teeth or both. They appeared to be preoccupied with rearranging it to prevent strangers from seeing their faces. Some of the more liberated women wore short scarves.

At the bank, we changed our Afghanis into Iranian rials and cashed more travelers checks into the new currency. Some of the employees were taking time out for tea, pouring it from dainty cups onto saucers from which they sipped it. Finished with my transactions, I waited for Jen outside where a tall dark fellow in bellbottoms approached me and asked to buy my jeans which we had learned were a coveted item in Asia.

From the bank, Graeme drove us to the city's largest bazaar, parking the bus near a field and an imposing mosque of dominant blues and greens. Disembarking, he lead us quickly through a winding footpath past numerous bazaar shops to one specializing in Persian carpets of every size, pattern and color combination. Graeme rented chadors from the shopkeeper for each of us girls and told us to put them on there. Wearing these was a prerequisite to entering the holy grounds of the mosque. The shopkeeper joined us as we continued through the bazaar and over the field to the mosque.

Amused by our "getup", we could now empathize with our Per-

sian sisters. The chadors were a nuisance; they were heavy and always slipping off. Perhaps the burkhas would have been better. At any rate, they were a necessity for gaining entrance to the holy grounds, even though we were not allowed inside the mosque.

Worshippers strolled reverently on the expansive grounds with their modernistic lightpoles and fountains while we asked the fellows to take our pictures in front of the mosque. Unfortunately our reverent behavior gave way to giggles as our pictures were taken. Understandably, this annoyed some of the Iranians who told us to leave and shooed us away. Needless to say, we were not there long enough to absorb the regal beauty of this domed structure with its high arches, multicolored stones and minarets.

Outside the grounds, Graeme collected the chadors and returned them to the shopkeeper. We hiked back to the bus and Graeme drove us back to the motel-camp where again we waited for Neil and Brenda. The day had turned into a lovely one, in the 70s. A group of the girls walked to a corner store to buy Pepsis, while others sat eating lunch on the grass near the bus and talked with another eastbound Australian group.

I went to the bus in search of Neil's notebook to read some of his notes on Iran. He had written that, of Iran's 35 million people, 98 percent were Muslim and 90 percent of these belonged to the Shiite sect. Forty percent of the Iranians were literate and their principal language is Persian (Farsi) written in Arabic script which is an Indo-European language. Historically, the

first Persians were related in speech and presumably in blood to the Aryans of India, the Medes and most European peoples. Consequently, centuries later in 1935, by a royal decree, the ancient name of Persia was changed to Iran, the modern version of Aryan.

As for Meshed's significance, to the Shiite Muslims, it is a place of great sanctity where thousands of pilgrims visit its great golden mosque built over the tomb of the Shiite holy Iman Ali Riza. The Arab term Meshed means place of martyrdom.

Under Shah Abbas I of the Safawid dynasty (reigned 1587-1628), who was known for his architectural ability, the city was embellished with many fine buildings, some of which still stand. Meshed reached its greatest glory in the 18th century when Nadir Shah made it the Persian capital after sacking Delhi and returning with the Peacock Throne and other fabulous Indian treasures.

Finished reading Neil's notes, I joined the others on the grass for a bite to eat. Within minutes, though, a beat up cab with Arabic script license plates pulled into the drive. Neil and Brenda had found us! Neil emerged from the car and carefully helped Brenda out; she had been injured, but could travel. Both were exhausted and dirty but as jubilant to be reunited with us as we were with them. They immediately headed for the showers, Brenda with an entourage of nurses helping her. The rest of us started organizing ourselves in the bus. Some of the fellows went scouting in the neighborhood to gather the rest of the group.

We left for Gorgan around 2 P.M., psyched up for a long

drive. Out of Meshed, Neil turned on the mike, and he and Brenda began to relay the events of their last two days. It had taken them nine hours to return to Kandahar by cab. To their joy and astonishment they found Brenda's passport where she had left it, under her pillow in her hotel room. The beds had not yet been changed. After finding the valued document, they turned right around and hired another cab for the return trip to Herat. By this time it was 2 A.M. An hour out of Kandahar, the cab flipped over into a ditch, not injuring anyone critically, though Brenda sustained a slight back injury. Unwilling to become involved with the Afghan authorities a second time, the couple walked away from the scene and hitchhiked in the dark and cold to the next town. Here they found a mud brick communal hotel where they spent the rest of the night in a large room occupied by sleeping unshaven turbaned men, some of whom could have had weapons. They rested, but hardly dared to sleep. At daybreak, they rented another cab which brought them to the border. They had no trouble getting into Iran, and then hired a cab to bring them to Meshed. The ordeal had cost Brenda her back injury and at least a hundred dollars, but it had also created a close friendship between herself and Neil.

Our afternoon drive brought us into more mountains and finally, by 9:30 P.M., we stopped for dinner at a roadside restaurant where two large posters of Harley-Davidson motorcycles hung on drab walls facing the royal photo of the Shah and his family. Here, on tables where remnants of rice belonging to previous diners

ers were litered, we consumed more chelo kebab and Pepsi.

Within the hour, we were traveling again. Comfortably full, those of us who could settled in to sleep for the rest of the drive. As we neared Gorgan around 1 A.M., Ross, with whom I was sitting, excitedly wakened me from a deep sleep to point out the distant lights of the Russian border on our right. On his small map with his flashlight, he pointed out our proximity to the Soviet Union. Actually, since Herat we had been very close to Russia, but along this small stretch of flatland the twinkling lights of the "Russian Bear" were now visible. This would go down in my journal, next to Neil and Brenda's finding us, as the most eventful part of the day.

In Gorgan, after trying two hotels, we finally found accommodations in a third around 2 A.M.--a dormitory type. Here the girls squeezed into two large rooms full of cots and beds with two sinks in each room. The fellows shared a large room with strangers. The porcelain slab toilets were down the hall. In no time we were asleep.

Gorgan to Tehran, capital of Iran  
Friday, April 9

After eating breakfast in a charming hotel cafe, we left Gorgan at 9:00 and shortly thereafter caught our first glimpse of the peaceful blue Caspian Sea on our right. Meeting the sea to our left were the pine-clad Elburz Mountains. Resort homes and cabins typical of the West peeked out from among the evergreens and dotted the coast; there were few mud brick dwellings here.

After having spent so much time traveling through extremely barren terrain and knowing there would be more ahead, it was therapeutic to feast our eyes on this fertile green coastline. Consequently, we stopped for photos and to wade in the Sea.

From the Caspian, we headed south over the mountains. After three hours, we took a lunch stop in a small village of mud brick and timber buildings. At a small grocery-cafe, several of us bought food and soft drinks from the young owner who, to our amazement was watching The Virginian on his T.V. It was strange to hear "American cowboys" speaking Farsi! The owner remarked that the United States must be a dangerous place to live as everyone there had guns. When he learned that we had been in Meshed recently, he told us that we had barely missed a mild earthquake there.

Finishing our lunch, we continued our mountain drive on a newly constructed highway. There were many semitrailers and American cars, some driven by youths showing off. Momentarily, I felt as if I were on a highway in the United States.

As Neil was walking down the aisle, he overheard Jen and me discussing Iran. With my overall remarks regarding Iran's striving toward western standards in architecture, transportation and dress, he interjected that, despite the fact that Iran was the world's second largest oil exporter, on the whole it was a poor country with the majority of its people living in mud brick houses. Also Iran had many unresolved political and social problems.

Nearing Tehran, he noted that this city was the site of the 1944 Tehran Conference where Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin met to

help bring about the downfall of the Axis Powers of World War II. The fact that Iran was sympathetic to the Allies guaranteed her economic aid from them.

We arrived in the busy metropolis of Tehran during the late afternoon rush hour. One of the major cities of the Middle East, it appeared to be quite western, like Meshed, with its tall modern buildings and modes of transportation. We drove through the center of the city to a square, the Maidan-Sipah, containing the government buildings. To the south of the square were the royal throne hall and museum containing, among other famous art and historical objects, the jeweled Peacock Throne. We soon drove by the famous Melli Bank, keeper of the crown jewels, and eventually found our hotel.

Our accommodations had improved, the rooms with sinks were adequately furnished and clean--more like those we had been used to in India and Pakistan. The toilets and showers were down the hall, but by now the porcelain slab toilets had become the rule of the road. It had been a long time since we had seen a standard toilet. Graeme would sleep on the bus to guard it in Tehran.

We were on our own for dinner, so we set out in small groups. Janet, Nino and I found a restaurant similar to an average American restaurant with good service, white tablecloths and clean dishes. Among well dressed Iranians, most of whom were men, we enjoyed a meal of roast chicken, chips, beer or wine, and returned early to the hotel.

Tehran to Isfahan  
Saturday, April 10

We breakfasted in our rooms around low tables, and boarded the bus at 7:45 A.M. Graeme was well and the bus in tact. Through the morning traffic, we headed south onto the Iranian Plateau. On the outskirts of Tehran, Robert asked Graeme to pull over; he was sick. Using the bus as his only shield from traffic, he relieved himself. Ten minutes further down the road, Megan asked Graeme to pull over. She too was sick. Jen went with her to provide some extra privacy. Twice again this episode repeated itself. It was determined that all four of the ill had eaten at the same restaurant the night before!

The smooth ride, with the occasional pothole, revealed a desert land with mud brick dwellings, peasants and caravans as well as aspects of the 20th century. Along the way, Neil briefed us about our next city, Isfahan. Originating between 3000 and 2000 B.C., it, to some historians, was the first Persian city of consequence. Both Isfahan and Terhan were also on Alexander's eastward march. Like so many of the cities we had passed through, Isfahan had been plundered by the, now familiar, conquerors of the past, including the ruthless Tamerlane who slaughtered 70,000 of its inhabitants and built a hill with their skulls.

Under Shah Abbas I, Isfahan became the capital of the Persian Empire. It reached its zenith in the 17th century and became one of the world's great cities with a population of 600,000. But the city rapidly declined in the 18th century following its conquest by the Afghans who butchered most of the populace.