

An American in Iran

Tara Isabella Burton | December/January 2017

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Iran's monuments are spellbinding. But, as an American expecting a hostile reception, Tara Isabella Burton was even more captivated by the unexpected warmth and openness of the country's people.



“Perhaps you have seen me before.”

I was walking through Isfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan Square, under one of the vaulted archways that run along the sides of the bazaar, when I was stopped by a man with a grey goatee, black glasses and a bicycle. The fading sun had turned the mosaics on the walls from dove-blue to indigo. Fountains flanked the long, central pool. The grass was dark with carpets doubling as picnic blankets, upon which families ate dinner straight from copper pots. Horses, lashed to buggies, galloped around the perimeter, dodging men selling wares from their bicycles. Boys played with toy swords where, once, noblemen had played polo as the shah watched on from the balcony of his palace.

“I was on ‘The Daily Show’.” Five years ago, he told me in an accent both Persian and French, a correspondent for the show had come to ask Iranians what they thought of America. Nobody else would dare speak to a journalist, he said, but he was unafraid. “He asked me who was president – I told him, Mr Obama. He asked me who was president before...” He listed them correctly, he said, “all the way back to Watergate”. They asked him to say “Death to America” on air.

“Of course, I refused.” He bowed, seized my hand and shook it vigorously. “I wish for a better relationship between our two countries.”

He gave me his name – Ali Shariat – in case I should need a guide. “I was professor. I studied my postgraduate degrees en France. I am retired, but I am still young. Now, je suis guide.”

He cycled to the next group of tourists. He began again. “Perhaps you have heard of me...”

To be an American in Iran is to attract immediate attention. The number of tourists from the United States is rising as relations between the countries warm up, but there are still precious few of us. And Americans are subject to special restrictions. Unlike most Europeans, they must travel with a licensed guide and stick to a fixed, pre-approved itinerary. (The British are subject to restrictions, though less stringent than those on Americans.) Those of us able or willing to navigate the byzantine visa regulations then face a raft of

rules more germane to the early days of the Islamic Republic than to the present. Officially, women are told to cover their wrists, their ankles and avoid speaking to strange men. These rules, I discovered, were not to be taken very seriously.

I saw two Irans on my visit. First, there was the Iran of antiquity and architecture. My trip traversed every monument between Tabriz and Shiraz. We travelled from the vast ruins of 2,500-year-old Persepolis – briefly, in the time of the deposed shah, the centre of secular-leaning Persian nationalism – through the geometrical 17th-century masterpieces of Isfahan to the mid-19th century in the form of the sensual walled Shazdeh gardens outside Mahan where fountains spilled from raised platforms and the air smelled of jasmine – a blissful relief in the desert heat, all the more so when you're sweating under a hijab.

This was the cosmopolitan Iran of the Silk Road, made manifest in mosque walls covered in Islamic calligraphy, rectangular courtyards modelled on the four elements of pre-Islamic Zoroastrian temples and meticulous miniatures that paid little attention to strict interpretations of Islam, which ban representations of people. I saw it in the dusky-rose stucco of the Ali Qapu Palace in Isfahan, where the banqueting halls were decorated with shadowy cut outs of musical instruments, and in the gold domes of Isfahan's Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, built in 1619 for Safavid royals with a secret tunnel running to the palace on the other side of the square.



Grand bazaar

The Imam Mosque at the southern end of Naqsh-e Jahan

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On the mountain road into Isfahan, we passed encampments of Qashqai nomads, their tents overlooking enclosures of sheep and goats. This road, like many, was punctuated by regular police checkpoints. (When I hurriedly replaced my fallen headscarf at one, the police officer half-rolled his eyes: "All I care about is that you're wearing your seatbelt," he said.)

I had expected this Iran, but I found another one by accident, when I walked alone – leaving my tour guide to run an errand, or getting lost during designated free time – through the kind of bazaars where people went to buy conditioner instead of turquoise or carpets; or when I asked strangers for directions to pharmacies to buy hydrocortisone for the heat rash my hijab had left on my neck. It was the country of people who were as interested in me as I was in them.



Selfie generation

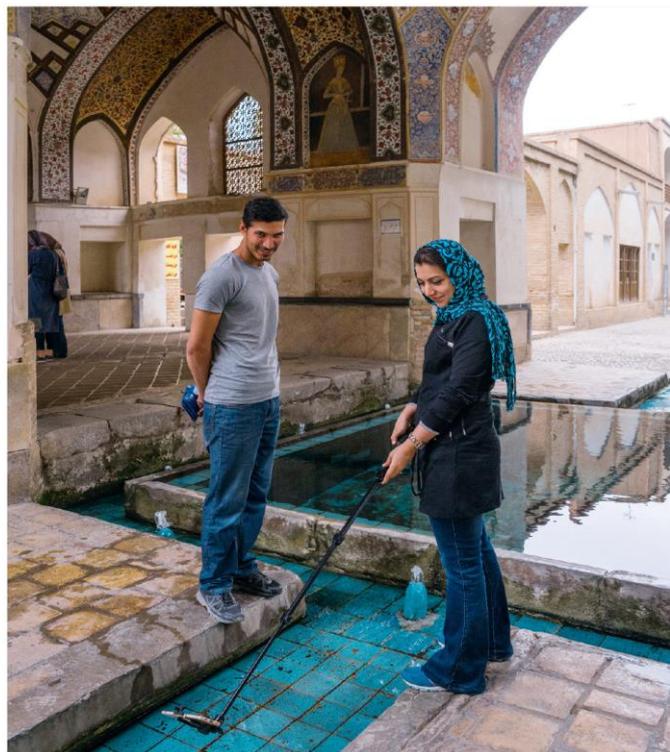
The author was approached every day for pictures



It is a cliché to speak of “the people” as a country’s greatest asset, but in Iran, it is unavoidable. As a young, obviously foreign woman, I was approached between 15 and 20 times a day for a photograph (usually a selfie, mostly by heavily made-up girls of my own age). Women in flowing chadors and in casual headscarves alike made eye contact and stopped to smile, even in the most congested urban streets, and sometimes blurted “hello!” or giggled as I walked past. Men called out “good evening, my sister” from passing cars. Children pointed at me and grinned and, when noticed, hid.

Nearly everyone who spoke to me apologised for the “bad relationship” between Iran and America. Some blamed “the government” – with an openness I found at first shocking – others expressed vague hope that the influence of the relatively moderate President Rouhani, whose nuclear deal with America engendered a degree of optimism among Iran’s young, would result in more visitors.

At a shrine in Shiraz – which, as a non-Muslim, I could not enter – a retired teacher sitting with his family in the courtyard apologised to me on behalf of his country for the fact that I was barred from seeing the 19th-century mirror-work in the interior, before introducing me to his infant grandson. In Kerman, when my tour companion got lost in the bazaar, a 12-year-old boy solemnly undertook to find her. “It is my obligation,” he informed me, in impeccable English, “and my duty.”



Bridging the gap

In Isfahan and around the country, Iranians of all ages and backgrounds welcomed the author to their world

I was most at liberty in Isfahan, where bazaar alleys snaked into courtyards of carved wood filled with cafés decorated with gramophones and antique photographs. That Isfahan is Iran’s most open city should not be surprising. Since its heyday as the Safavid capital in the 17th century, under the internationalist, Shah Abbas, Isfahan has been a city of traders and foreign craftsmen. At Abbas’s Chehel Sotun (Forty Columns) Palace, its 20 wood-carved columns transformed into 40 when viewed in the reflection of its fountains, and jewel-toned frescoes of military victories on the ceiling – painted by visiting Italians – were interspersed with orange and pale-blue geometric stars. Armenians found a refuge from Ottoman aggression here, and Georgians and Greeks sold their wares and changed money in the bazaar off

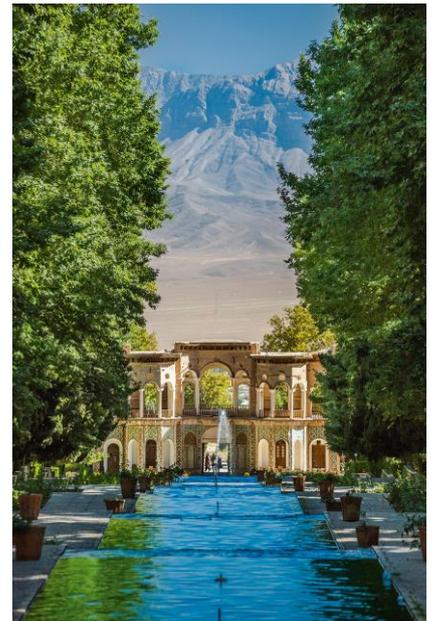
Naqsh-e Jahan Square, where I met a young carpet-seller called Rezahamid who invited me to “couchsurf” – he regularly hosts Europeans in his home – and regaled me with his fitness regime.

Today, Isfahan – popular with European backpackers and domestic tourists alike – retains that breathless openness. In Jolfa, the modern Armenian quarter, with its low fin-de-siècle townhouses, restaurants like Hermes serve smoothies and Caesar salads under chandeliers made of teapots, and coffee shops cater to the well-heeled and -dressed (for women this means jeans, impeccable contouring and a light headscarf worn at the crown of the head and secured by expensive sunglasses; for men, hair gel and an anachronistic, waxed moustache reminiscent of Shah Abbas’s own). Though the chador of conservative women is more prevalent in the warren around the Friday Mosque in the former Jewish quarter, this neighbourhood, too, is changing: a government renovation project, one of many in this city, is moving the open-air fabric and houseware shops to a more orderly, renovated bazaar.

My welcome, in each district, was the same. At a park near the 17th-century Qaju bridge, a pair of old men played chess on a low stucco wall. They were surrounded – as everywhere else in Iran, it seemed – by picnicking families. One man waved me over. He spoke no English. I spoke no Farsi. We played for over an hour. He won – and then applauded me for what I understood to be a close game.

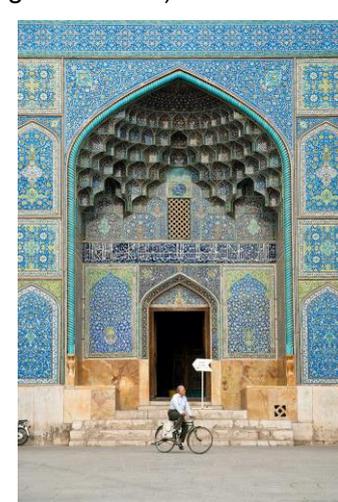
Later, I was sitting in a café with walls papered in Starbucks, Illy and Lavazza logos when a man at the next table struck up a conversation over rose-cardamom summer tea.

“Isfahan is different from other cities,” he said. “It’s a city of artists.” He showed me photographs of his work on his phone; he, like most Iranians I met, uses Instagram regularly. (Facebook is blocked by the government.)



Paradise found

Cascading fountains in the Shazdeh gardens near Mahan



Into the blue

Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque

I worried, at first, that we might attract undue attention – my tour guide, Farzaneh, had told us how, some 15 years ago, she’d been interrogated for appearing in public with a male colleague. But, instead, the proprietor of the café came out to join us.

Talking to strangers – for so many strangers wanted to talk – I heard many stories, related with remarkable openness. Young Iranians told me about house parties, complete with home-made moonshine, and sent me messages on Instagram long after our brief street-side encounters (by my second week in Iran, after tagging photographs of gardens and ruins, half of the comments were in Farsi). People I had only just met told me about the proxy servers they used to get around government censors, and about booze-and-pork weekend runs to neighbouring Armenia. They shrugged off the threats of lashings for consuming alcohol: “You just bribe the police,” one told me laconically. He didn’t know anyone who’d ever actually been lashed, and even if he had done, it wouldn’t have changed anything: “Come on. We’re young. You only get one life!”

Towards the end of my trip, I wandered into a restaurant a local had recommended just off the main bazaar, hidden in a courtyard full of antique, unattached doors and a large chicken coop. I noticed a familiar bicycle leaning against the wall.

There, under shelves so cluttered with antique lamps that you couldn’t see the wall, Ali Shariat was presiding over a group of young French tourists, with a pot of tea in one hand and a copy of the “Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam”, Persia’s 1,000-year-old paean to hedonism, in the other.

“Perhaps you have seen me before,” he began, before realising that we had already met. He handed me a spare copy of the “Rubaiyat” – “it’s in six languages” – and invited me to read along:

*Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,
before we too into the
Dust descend;
Dust into Dust, and under Dust to lie
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer and – sans End!*