

Conversations behind the veil

July 17, 2010 – *The Sydney Morning Herald*

<http://www.smh.com.au/travel/conversations-behind-the-veil-20100716-10dkb.html>

True reflection ... shopping in northern Tehran. Photo: Reuters

As a solo traveller, Michelle Wranik is charmed - and perpetually delayed - by the kindness of Iranians.

I have only two days to explore Isfahan, a city Iranians call "Nesf-e-Jahan", meaning "half the world", but it's impossible to stick to an itinerary.

The problem isn't my schedule - it's the Iranian people. They're turning out to be the friendliest souls in the world, eager to meet foreigners and anxious to change the world's view of their country as being hostile to the West and a nuclear threat. I'm travelling solo through the country, which to Iranians means I'm fair game for conversation. They can spot me coming a mile off. Even swathed in a pashmina as a headscarf, I'm approached every few minutes as I stroll along Isfahan's tree-lined Chaharbagh Boulevard one morning; first by a group of teenagers, then an earnest university student named Maryam and finally by a young couple who swooped after spotting me buying Iranian sweets. Feeble protestations are useless - I'm told the history of gaz, a chewy Isfahani nougat, whether I like it or not.



A mathematics teacher named Mr Ali is next. His battered vehicle screeches to a halt as I get ready to dash across a traffic-snarled road. Waving madly, he launches his body from the car like a goalkeeper and begins firing questions in his "too bad English". I'm still there 45 minutes later, feeling mean for turning down an invitation to lunch with his wife and young son.

With so many excitable Persians on the loose, it's a rarity to find myself alone, in the shadow of the imposing Imam Mosque in Naghsh-e Jahan Square, later that afternoon. Isfahan was the pearl of the Safavid empire, the greatest of all the Persian dynasties, and this square is surely its diamond. It takes at least a day to explore its mosques, palaces and tea houses, without making a dent in the sprawling Grand Bazaar, where merchants sell Persian carpets and pistachios, miniature paintings etched on camel bones and huge copper bowls filled with spices.

But for the moment, I revel in my solitude. Tilting my head back to marvel at the mosque's intricate, mosaic dome, I'm alone all of two minutes before a small man with dishevelled hair and a faded brown coat approaches. "I am Zizou le Nomade," he says, flashing a disarming grin and launching into a spiel about Safavid architecture. Did I know, he says, lowering his voice, that builders purposefully constructed the mosque with asymmetrical flaws, so as not to offend Allah with man-made perfection?

Zizou is a walking, talking guidebook, quick to share tales of his nomadic roots in the Khuzestan province and his claim to fame: an appearance in Jason Elliot's 2006 book *Mirrors of the Unseen: Journeys in Iran*. "Do you have a copy?" he asks hopefully. "I'm on page 302."

Alarm bells ring when I learn he works in a carpet shop, the only merchants in Iran permitted to accept foreign credit cards. With his immaculate language skills and ice-to-an-Eskimo sales pitch, Zizou could make a tidy commission. But he's not interested in my MasterCard. He wants to play tour guide. Remembering Mr Ali's crestfallen face, I agree to accompany him to Takht-e Foulad cemetery.

"It's not in any guidebook," Zizou says as we stroll between tombs of religious figures, mystics and thousands of haunting photographs, honouring young men martyred in the Iran-Iraq War. We're paused at one when an elderly woman, using her chador to dab at her tears, offers us a plate of Iranian sweets.

Zizou's tour lasts several hours and by the time we part at the Zayandeh River, the sun has nearly set. Iranians are gathered on the riverbanks, reading poetry aloud, smoking shisha or drinking tea under the Si-o-Seh bridge. I want to linger but I'm late to meet Farzam, a university student I've befriended.

In typical Iranian fashion, his family has insisted on hosting me for dinner and there's a small crowd waiting to greet me: uncles, nieces, even neighbours. I barely get a foot inside before I'm accosted by Farzam's younger cousin, Leila. "What do you think of Iran?" "What do your friends think of Iranian people?" "What are the schools like in Australia?" "Is it true the word kangaroo means 'I don't know'?"

I slide on to the sofa and they stare at me expectantly. "Your headscarf?" says Farzam, gesturing at my pashmina. "Oh?" I say, startled. "I can remove it?" "Yes!" the family choruses, laughing. One must be cautious about hijab, or conservative dress. Like most women, I have eschewed the traditional black chador, meaning "tent", worn over head-wear and various layers of coats. I'm travelling in jeans, headscarf and a thigh-length coat known as a manteau.

While demure in public, Iranians let their hair down at home - literally. Ditching the headscarf is first. A glass of wine could be next. "It's expensive but there are ways to buy alcohol here," Farzam's uncle explains, pouring a glass of

French Beaujolais smuggled over for the occasion. Alcohol is banned under the Islamic regime but Iranians are masters of the private soiree.

Cable television offers more respite. After so many days wrapped in hijab, the sight of scantily clad clubbers gyrating on the family's television shocks me. It's the polar opposite to the Stalin-esque local television advertisement I'd seen at my hotel, with rousing music, fluttering flags and the stern faces of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

It seems every Iranian has something to say about Ahmadinejad. Protests after his controversial re-election last year were swiftly and violently silenced but that doesn't stop Iranians talking behind closed doors. "We didn't vote for him," announces Farzam's mother, gliding into the room with a tray of tea. "Nobody voted for him. We don't know one Iranian who did."

Farzam's mother is the epitome of Persian glamour, with an impish sense of humour that runs in the family. As we feast on a smorgasbord of meats, saffron rice, mint, radish and feta, I ask the family to tell me an Iranian joke. Farzam grins slyly before replying: "Ahmadinejad."

Iran's oppressive regime seems entirely at odds with the witty, educated people I meet.

I feel that disparity again in Tehran. A chill wind is blowing from the snow-capped Alborz Mountains and I'm hurrying along Taleghani Avenue, near the former US Embassy. Here, the walls are covered with fading anti-Western murals, painted in 1979 after the Iranian Revolution when a gang of hardline Islamic students stormed in to take 52 Americans hostage.

"Down with USA" is on one mural. Another depicts a ghoulish Statue of Liberty with a skull for a face. By contrast, fashionable Tehrani girls, wearing colourful scarfs, leather boots and handbags, trot past as I duck down an escalator into one of the city's cheap, efficient metro stations, beneath the urban smog. When I disembark in the city's south, I approach a young couple for directions to Tehran's Grand Bazaar.

"Yes, we know the Grand Bazaar," they exclaim. "Please, let us show you."

I have only two days to explore Tehran. "Of course," I reply.

FAST FACTS

Getting there

There are regular flights, buses and trains between Tehran and Isfahan.

Eating there

Typical Iranian food includes biryani-style rice dishes, charcoal-grilled kebabs and hearty meat stews cooked with barley and eggplant. Isfahan's Sofreh Khaneh Sonnati is a traditional restaurant with dining on takhts (raised divans); at Imam Square.