

# When everything you've heard is wrong, wrong, wrong

Ben Groundwater

April 16, 2013 – The Sydney Morning Herald

<http://www.smh.com.au/travel/when-everything-youve-heard-is-wrong-wrong-wrong-20130416-2hwyj.html>



*Iranian women don't all cover their faces. Photo: AFP*

The expectation is that this will be a serious challenge. But that, like pretty much everything else we've come to expect about Iran, is wrong.

You have to do your research before you visit a place like this. There's no base of knowledge there to work from, no tales from friends to judge. It's a mystery, because no one goes there.

It's not just safety warnings and threat levels to keep an eye on (they seemed to range from "dire" to "frightening"), but the ins and outs of travel in a country you know nothing about.

You could go to the Australian government's [Smartraveller website](#), but that will just tell you to cancel your flights and have a good hard look at yourself.

So we've been trawling the travel forums, TripAdvisor and Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree, trying to get an accurate representation of what it's like to travel through this place. Is it safe? Is it easy? Where do you go? What do you do?

Getting in will be hard, TripAdvisor tells us. We haven't had time to organise visas in advance, and we're reliably informed that VOA applicants are turned away regularly for no good reason. So that's a risk we're going to have to take.

But what happens once we're in?

It's a strange country. There's a huge gender divide, according to one contributor. Men and women sit separately on public transport. They also eat separately in restaurants, the women in cordoned areas where they can modestly remove their facial coverings to eat.

You can't buy a Coca-Cola in Iran. It's one of the few countries in the world that doesn't stock it. They have their own brand.

There are strict dress codes to adhere to. As a man, I'll need to have my arms and legs covered at all times, while my friend Michelle will need to abide by the rules of hijab, keeping everything but her face hidden behind long, baggy clothing and a headscarf.

Partially right. But mostly wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong.

It doesn't take long to see that we've been hopelessly misinformed. It starts with the visa. There's a small booth at Tehran airport, in a quiet part of the terminal under blazing fluorescent lights. It's intimidating, but the guy behind the counter is courteous.

He hands me a form to fill out - it's smaller and simpler than the yellow card you need to enter Australia as a citizen. Michelle doesn't even need to fill in one for herself. She simply goes in as my "accompaniment", meaning she doesn't even need to state her occupation.

No backstory necessary. No photos or supporting documents. It's a rubber-stamp job.

We fill in the form, pay the money, stickers are placed in our passports and we're on our way into the great unknown.

We stroll around Tehran that night, stopping at a small store to buy water. There are the bottles in the fridge, right next to the Coca-Cola. The guy behind the counter smiles and hands us a small snack. "For you," he says. "Please try it."

There's a doorway just down the street; we peer through the windows and see a familiar sight: people sitting at tables sipping coffee, chatting. It's a cafe. We sit down on wooden seats, taking in the modern artwork on the walls, the Persian carpets on the floors.

What we're most surprised by is the people. Men and women sit together at tables, some on laptops, some even holding hands, the girls pushing the boundaries of hijab, with scarves carefully draped over buns in their hair, most of their heads and necks uncovered. What is this?

It's Iran, the real Iran, and it's refreshing to find that you can still be surprised by a destination these days, that the entire world hasn't been perfectly documented and star-rated and committed to the annals of a TripAdvisor forum.

There's still adventure out there, and truth. Iran isn't a scary place, nor is it as strict as publicity would suggest. It's also easy to get in to.

The first hurdle, obviously, is getting in. And that's a big hurdle. We don't have visas, so the nerves are jangling as we touch down at Tehran airport, far from sure that within the next few hours we'll have been set free in the Axis of Evil. From everything we've read, the success of our visa-on-arrival (VOA) application will hinge on a whim, the dumb luck of a grumpy immigration official's assessment of our intentions.

But we're prepared. We're clutching a sheaf of papers: evidence of hotel bookings, detailed itineraries, insurance forms and passport photos. Plus we've spent the past hour or so creating believable backstories to explain why two friends would want to travel together through a strict Islamic country that no one else wants to go to.



*Young women at a north Tehran coffee shop. Photo: Getty Images*