

Easter in Sydney is noted for the Royal Show and sitting around eating cheap chocolate; consequently I decided to do something completely different and went to Iran. My tour started when most of us met at Istanbul Airport to fly to Isfahan. As the plane circled prior to landing at 2 AM we madly scrambled to put on our hijabs to make ourselves presentable to immigration. Once we cleared that formality we then got on our bus and headed to Shahrekord, a regional centre.

My tour was with a mob called Political Tours who specialise in tours to places with interesting but not completely deadly current events. Essentially it has evolved from the realisation by foreign correspondents when entertaining visiting friends/relatives that the places they could take their visitors to were usually far more interesting than the standard tourist trail, particularly for those interested in current events. So instead of fighting coach loads of other tourists at the great sites of antiquity we went to a number of equally interesting places slightly off the beaten track.



Naturally after an overnight flight and a two hour drive we were pretty knackered by the time we got to Shahrekord and we crashed for the morning. We all convened at lunchtime where we were introduced to our first cultural experience, Iranian beer. One mouthful was enough to get me to abstain, however other members of the group (obviously with more refined palates) continue to imbibe.

We were then joined by the other members of the group and comprised seven punters and three guides. The Poms were Nicholas & Karen, the Political Tours operatives; Christopher, the expert on Iran having written books on the region¹; the punters comprised Sheila & Hillary (the Shillary's²), two sisters one of which was Christopher's aunt; Patricia who had been to school with the Shillary's and Laura a pensions lawyer. The Canadians were Pauline and Blaine, the token bloke. Plus me, the token Aussie. Most importantly there was Farid our local tour guide and mister fix it and Jalaal our intrepid driver.

The presidential elections had thrown a spanner in the works and "they" are refusing permission for a number of itinerary items. No to be daunted Nicholas came up with alternatives; our first visit is to a local fort/palace, Khoda Rahman Kahn. It has been extensively restored by the government, and the restoration and ongoing preservation employs a number of people. Iran is a country you can make a career out of restoration and preservation of historical buildings.



The issue of adaptive reuse for historical buildings is one that challenges many countries; a country like Iran has to deal with both the volume and quality of properties. Many of these are not on the obvious foreign tourist trail. Some like bazaars are successfully continuing their original use, however it is difficult to convert many properties to modern commercial or retail uses while maintaining their historical fabric.

¹ Actually written extensively, he is so famous he even has a Wikipedia page: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_de_Bellaigue

² I had difficulty telling them apart consequently I've referred to them in the collective



We had afternoon tea at a traditional teahouse which had recently opened; there are many small businesses opening up in part due to easing of sanctions³ and more moderate influences. The opportunities of a hitherto closed market of 80 million educated people are exceedingly attractive. The owner came up and completely uninvited sang local songs for us in the local Bakhtiari language, he had a very beautiful voice and the songs were very moving.

This was followed by a walk around the town where we visited a calligraphy centre, Iranian's are

very proud of their Farsi script and calligraphy is a popular hobby. This centre was another example of adaptive reuse of a historical building for education/gallery/cultural uses and it had a beautiful mirror room. This was followed by a visit to a local shrine to two women, Halimeh and Hakimeh Khatoon Shrine which is popular with local woman. It serves both a religious and social purpose, woman come to pray for intercession and catch up with friends. Shrines and mosques are sex segregated so naturally we divided up. It was in two parts, the shrine where woman were praying and a larger area inside which was more social, one woman was even breastfeeding. We had been warned that Iranians are very friendly and curious and after initial hesitance we were practically mobbed. Many of them came up to ask us where we were from, etc, etc; numerous selfie's were taken and were invited to take tea. The men were champing at the bit by the time we got out and this gave us an indication of what to expect⁴.

Shahrekord is considered the "roof of Iran" and is at 2,070 metres; that evening Blaine and I disdained the lift and attempted to climb two flights of stairs without wheezing.

More of the itinerary had been cancelled "due to the elections" and by this stage Nicholas was visibly gnashing his teeth⁵. It had been proposed that we visit a couple of local factories which would give an indication of the level of manufacturing plus the integration of Iran with surrounding countries as many manufactured goods are exported over immediate borders.



Not to be daunted a trip to a very small village, Yaseh Chah, was moved forward. We stopped at Zaman Khan Bridge which was originally constructed in Sasanian or pre-Islamic times. As an engineer's daughter I was seriously impressed by the quality of the infrastructure. While the bridge was repaired 11th and 14th centuries, given the speed and volume of the water the original construction was impressive for its time. This section of the river is popular in summer with Iranians and foreign tourists for white water rafting.

³ For more details – <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21701118-iran-says-west-not-honouring-its-side-nuclear-deal-poppycock-sanctions>

⁴ This is also an indication of a smaller group and a non-mainstream tourist location

⁵ These were items that had been organised and paid for months in advance and you could certainly understand why he was particularly peeved

The village is very traditional with houses made of rendered mud brick; the architecture features many covered walkways which are built over. The reason for the covered walkways is shade in summer and shelter from snow & rain in winter. Similar to many other countries the village has a lot of old people with many of the younger people moving to larger population centres. We visited some local people that Nicholas knows, an older couple plus one of their adult sons, his wife and small child. The older couple continue to farm assisted by the son who supplements his income working as a real estate agent.

While the village may be ageing this does not mean people have lost contact with their land as many continue to farm, employing labour when needed. Also the village is close enough to Shahrekord and Isfahan to be a viable weekender and the local sales market is active. The main form of agriculture is orchards (nuts and fruit for drying) on the floodplain of Saman Rood. We had bought provisions earlier and had a picnic beside the river as it tried very hard to rain.

Back in Shahrekord we went for a walk before dinner and met up with some young woman practising their archery. They explained that they



are practising for national and international competitions and some had very successfully competed internationally. We also asked them about the hijab, one said that it should not be compulsory and up to the individual; another said that it should be worn properly as many woman push it back to show the front of their hair (myself included). That evening we had dinner in a restaurant that specialises in a traditional dish which has been marketed as a franchise arrangement, Mr Dizi, with branding/logos/etc.



Christopher demonstrating to one of the Shillary's the correct technique

The next day we travelled to Isfahan and to make up for the lack of factories Nicholas organised an impromptu stop at a larger village along the way. Again the farming story was similar with orchards; there has been around 20 years of drought and

farmers are looking at crops which use less water (almonds). Landowners also supplement their income with other activities (truck driving). The village had a Khannot Qanat which is a specially constructed underground water channel feeding a local reservoir which is then used by the farmers. Similar to Australia they have riparian rights to this water and can trade these. We also had a look at the local health clinic⁶, which was run by women health professionals and mostly featured woman's health issues (some cute babies too). They were quite open about discussing family planning and contraception, the cost is covered by local village insurance. Another feature of the village was a local hall which was used for meetings and passion plays.



No, it's not a swimming pool, it's a Khannot Qanat

⁶ The main illnesses are similar to Australia, blood pressure, diabetes and heart attacks



Once in Isfahan we had a walk around the Armenian Quarter and visited the Holy Saviour Cathedral which had been in operation since the 15th century. There are a number of minority religions in Iran, for example it has the second largest Jewish population (after Israel) in the Middle East. There are even seats in parliament reserved for certain minorities. We then went to the Isfahan Music Museum, this place is a must see. Even in the heights of the revolution people kept their instruments and when things started to relax making traditional music was as popular as ever. One section of the Museum has traditional Iranian instruments and there is a small concert area downstairs. We were treated to a number of

songs and the local TV station was also filming. Iranian TV and radio play music, but they do not show the instruments being played (they can show the faces of musicians). As a finale the Tonbak (the drum) player treated us to a solo, the drum is played with all 10 fingers plus different parts of the hand which enables a range of sounds. It was seriously impressive.

We then checked into the Hotel Abbasi; which has a central garden courtyard which is divine, it has been planted with fragrant flowers and in the early evening the perfume is heavenly. I just wanted to wander around soaking up the atmosphere. There are tables and chairs throughout the courtyard where you can take tea, sit and chat and generally relax.



We then walked to the (World Heritage listed) Iman Square. In the early evening it is magical,



the light is perfect, barn swallows are darting around, locals are promenading and picnicking is a popular activity. There is something about the soft early evening light that brings out the aesthetic qualities in the architecture. During the Shah's time the square was used as a polo field, personally I consider a public square gets far more use.

Once again we headed off to a local restaurant, it is becoming apparent that Farid is somewhat of a gourmand and knows every new and happening eatery in the country. The Shillary's have

commented that their earlier bespoke tour featured a certain level of sameness in the menu (soup, salad, kebabs) whereas we have a different selection every night to tempt and delight us (and make us decide to diet when we get home).

The next morning we went to the Rose Garden of the Martyrs; this is the cemetery for those who were killed in the Iran/Iraq war. The war lasted from 1980 to 1988 and the cemetery contains thousands and thousands of graves of young men and some young woman. The sheer size of the cemetery takes you back and you are reminded that there are local equivalents in many regional towns. While Saddam Hussein started the war by invading Khuzestan province, prolonging it suited the new revolutionary government. Superpowers sold weapons to both sides and somebody sold fertiliser to Saddam to make chemical weapons.

There were organised school trips to the cemetery and we saw a number of groups of boys⁷. This featured rousing lectures from an ex-serviceman and a cleric plus playacting involving dressing up with bandannas, toy guns and shouting slogans “Death to America”. A number of others in the tour found the scenes very confronting and they wondered what sort of people these children would be in the future if this was part of their education. I was reminded of how we have reinterpreted a number of Australian military battles and how the current Australian narrative has changed from my school days. Both Nicholas and Christopher commented that for many children it was a day out with sweets.



What I did find sobering was the small groups of (often) woman obviously going to put flowers on the grave(s) of a loved one. It reminded me of how Australians and New Zealanders make pilgrimages to the great cemeteries of the two World Wars to remember lost relatives and remind themselves of the sacrifice that has been made and also remind themselves of the futility of war. I considered that this quiet pilgrimage would be a more lasting memory than a school excursion. Farid spoke of when he was a child when the war was on a special vehicle would come to give news when someone had been slain. When this vehicle appeared in your street the children would all stop playing and wait with trepidation to see which house it stopped in front of.

It was also interesting that we were the only foreign tourists there.

After this it was pleasant to do some sightseeing along the historic Si-o-se Pol Bridge. As usual the locals were very curious and the Shillary’s brushed up on their Farsi with the aid of their trusty phrasebook. There are parks surrounding the bridge and many locals obviously enjoy picnicking, promenading and catching up with friends.



Nicholas, being a Pom, believes in the benefits of afternoon tea, preferably with chocolate cake, sometimes straight after lunch. Farid is not big on desert

⁷ Boys and girls take alternate days, a day earlier or later we would have seen girls

and while our restaurants all have tasty main courses there is not enough pud to please the Poms. So we made our way to a tea house on another bridge over the river. It is delightful, with little carpeted alcoves on which you can sit and watch the water rushing by.

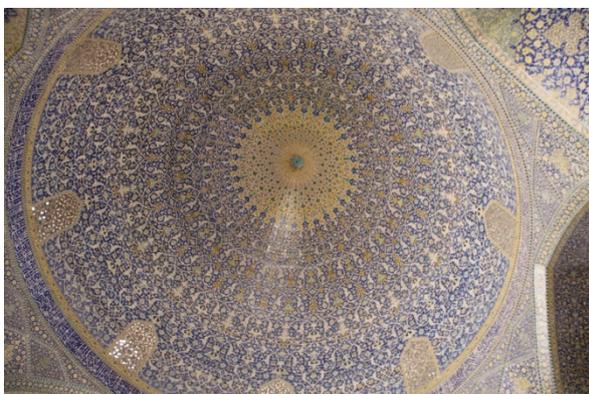


Many of these tea houses have a variety of drinks including coffee, tea (green and black), shakes, smoothies and one notable specialty herbal teas or infusions. Think pomegranate and rosewater, lime and ginger, many of these are delicious and I tried as many different variations as possible. Laura, who has to put up with actuaries in her day job⁸, and I sat in one of the alcoves and enjoyed the items on offer while the others munched their chocolate cake⁹.



Isfahan is intersected by the river Zayandeh Rood and there are a number of historic bridges, in addition to access there are many features which the locals enjoy. At this time of year the piers at the base of the arches are above the water so many locals use these on which to picnic.

We then went back to Iman Square to look at Iman Mosque and Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in daylight. These buildings are amazing with their sheer size and detail. In particular the acoustics in Iman mosque are excellent. There is a particular location where even a whisper can be heard throughout the building. Farid suggested that someone singing to show off the acoustics, one of the Shillary's sang the Eaton boating song (after declining my suggestion of Queen of the Night). The acoustics gave her voice a wonderful crystalline quality which she insisted was not there normally. We didn't realise that we would be hearing more of the Eaton boating song.



⁸ What did she do in a previous life to deserve that one

⁹ You would have thought that for all their posh pommy education they would have known to use a cake fork



Afterwards we peeled off to do a spot of retail therapy as the buildings surrounding the square are still used as a bazaar. The St Trinians crowd¹⁰ went off together, while the rest of us went our separate ways. I managed to find some Ayatollah Khomeini fridge magnets before stopping at a shop which I saw the previous evening that had some beautiful miniatures (birds of course).

We met for a debrief in the hotel courtyard, particularly to discuss people's thoughts about the Rose Garden of the Martyrs. It was here that I had the most divine experience of the entire trip. Sitting in that beautiful courtyard with all the flowers eating saffron ice cream, I don't think it gets any better than that.

After dinner we went to the House of Strength. Similar to many Middle Eastern countries Iran has a local form of martial arts featuring a series of exercises which have parallels in the battlefield. There was a type of calisthenics involving large wooden skittles (weighing kilograms) plus a type of push-up and another exercise involving a metal bar with a heavy metal chain attached, not all men could do this exercise and it was designed to build up strength for an archer. There was a strong community and social element to the exercises as they were done in a group and everybody undertook an individual demonstration in the centre.



I could see many similarities with the Chinese martial arts with which I am familiar, many of the exercises had direct application to battlefield skills. Also in a martial situation different people would specialise with different weapons and there was an obvious specialisation within the exercises. It finished with a number of affirmations and a prayer. There was a range of ages and skill sets, plus a number had bought their young sons.

We then travelled to Tehran, on the way we stopped at Qom, one of the three main religious centres in Iran. After a very nice lunch in another new restaurant featuring a delightful courtyard garden we met with a local cleric (moderate). We had a discussion on modern Iran, current political influences and issues around the upcoming elections. There was music playing in the background and he had a delightful reception room featuring his extensive library.

We were able to put a number of questions to him in particular the behaviour of schoolchildren in the Rose Garden of the Martyrs. He commented that "this form of behaviour has had its day" and fostering hatred is bad for the children and the future. There are two ways the war should be remembered, firstly to pay respects for those who died and secondly to maintain readiness in the event of another war.

¹⁰ The Shillary's and Patricia – on the grounds they all went to school together – I'm surprised they didn't link arms and shout "Jolly Hockey Sticks"



Laura, Me, Pauline, Nicholas, Mr Ayazi Mashad, Blaine, Christopher, Shillary #1, Patricia, Shillary #2

Pauline as usual asked her probing questions on the role of women, plus we also asked his position on the hijab which he responded that it should not be compulsory nor should it be banned. Before the revolution the female literacy rate was 30% – 40% now it is approximately 95% plus the majority of students at university are women, this has a flow on effect to society. He also made the joke that Iran has had Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, now it is the west's turn with Donald Trump. It was a very interesting meeting and he came across as a most erudite man.

We then visited the shrine of Fatima which is a major destination in the city. This was the only mosque/shrine where we had to wear a chador, they had a delightful pastel patterned model just for tourists in a wonderful nylon fabric similar to a shower curtain (sorry no photo). Again a number of women came up and spoke with us, many were from different countries. I spoke with two women from India and France: the Indian woman said that she preferred to live in Iran as she felt safer particularly with regard to harassment from men. She commented that India virtually every week she would hear of a rape through her social circle, and this didn't happen in Iran. It was a very interesting insight on life in the two countries.

We then visited the shrine of

We then hit the metropolis of Tehran again Nicholas, had to come up with some alternative activities due to more of our original itinerary being cancelled. Of all the cancellations the two that I really would have liked were the meetings with a newspaper editor/journalist and with a politician. Our morning started with a visit to the bazaar in North Tehran where many locals buy their supermarket items.



Following this we went for a walk through the streets of North Tehran, this is the upmarket end of town as being higher it is cooler in summer. The gardens are beautiful particularly as it is spring and many of the flowers are out. Christopher decided that morning tea was essential and purchased some cream puffs at a local bakery, so we wandered through the streets eating cream puffs and admiring the architecture. I stopped to take a photograph of a flower seller and he gave me a bunch of freesias and wouldn't accept payment, it was most delightful.



Lunch was at another one of Farid’s excellent choices, Cafe Tehran¹¹. This was one of the most fashionable cafes in Tehran and the crowd was definitely upmarket, I was glad I bought some halfway decent outfits rather than slumming in my usual tourist tat. This was followed by a meeting with a town planner who explained some of the features of Tehran’s urban history and layout including the non-observance of any Master Plan. There are considerable pressures on land use particularly for residential redevelopment and as a consequence Tehran is losing many of its historical buildings. He had a wonderful quote

“there are many stories about Tehran; the beauty is that no one knows which one is true”. Christopher and Nicholas also regaled us with stories of Queen Elizabeth visiting Tehran (before the revolution). One of the local dignitaries was most concerned about presenting an attractive face to HRH consequently re-landscaped the grounds around her accommodation by chopping down all the trees and planting lawns. The problem is that the lawns did not grow well on that soil and required extensive fertiliser (manure). In the heat the smell was atrocious and there was an attempt to cover this up with gallons of rosewater. HRH’s visit was cut short to that location.

We then visited Tabiat Bridge, a three-level pedestrian bridge over the main expressway linking parks on either side. It was well patronised by many locals and was an excellent location for people watching. There was a couple with her in a chador with bright red platform shoes and he was carrying the baby in a papoose. Another couple holding hands with her looking glamorous in a chador and he was obviously channelling Elvis Presley¹². The sporting facilities were also well used and I noticed women practising kickboxing and basketball.



View from a bridge

¹¹ You have to say it in the local accent, which of course I can’t

¹² The king lives in Iran, the quality of pompadours was outstanding, in Shahrekord one young man even managed the white suit

That evening we had a meeting with the UN operative who had been involved with the talks between Iran, Turkey and Russia regarding Syria. The insight was that a lot of the conflict in the region can be viewed as a Cold War between Saudi Arabia and Iran, both of which have larger backers. Plus there are numerous factions and splinter groups which also have their interests. It was not positive about a short-term outcome for Syria.

The next day was Friday (the equivalent of Sunday) consequently our driver had the day off so we had to slum it on public transport and took the Tehran Metro¹³ to a Friday market. This is essentially a flea market and featured an amazing array of new and used items; you could really come back with some amazing stuff if you had a large enough suitcase capacity.



You can't say you've really lived until you've taken a taxi in Tehran; however I can't describe much about the ride as I had my eyes shut for most of it. As there were no seat belts I attempted to hang on to my seat by clenching the cheeks of my bum. We visited some new art galleries featuring local artists and the local art scene is attempting to encourage patronage by making Friday afternoon the gallery hopping day where you can catch up with friends, look at things and maybe buy.



The first gallery was the young PYT crowd, many very elegantly dressed. The second gallery was a slightly older, more bohemian crowd and featured a local photographer. Both Christopher and Nicholas commented that many of the photographs would not have been allowed to be shown three years earlier. I found one of Syrian refugees outside their camp somewhere in Iran particularly moving, this made you realise the refugee crisis is throughout the region. Another featured the journey taken by someone undergoing a sex change (male to female), Iranians are relaxed about sexuality except for homosexuality and you can get a sex change on the public health.

¹³ A surprisingly familiar experience

Similar to most metros they have an octopus/opal/oyster card which you can top up, however we purchased a one-day excursion.



The next day we visited the US Embassy which had been the scene of the hostage taking drama. The US is still paying rent of the embassy although it has partially been turned into a public museum featuring the original equipment plus a number of graphic additions¹⁴.

We were shown around by a couple of young guides who went into the history of the events but were also quite open in discussing the implications and outcomes. One comment that had been made previously and that they both reinforced was that the students who took the hostages later said that it was something that should not have been done. It contravened all diplomatic laws and lead to delaying of normalisation of relationships. The internal politics of Iran at the time also played a part, in that after the students invaded the embassy Khomeini did not come down on their side until three days later. At the time there was deep concern that the US would attempt to reinstate the Shah (similar to the 1953 coup) and the hostage drama (similar to the prolonging of the Iran/Iraq war) enabled many to cement their position in the revolution.

The electronic equipment which was mostly used to spy on the Russians¹⁵ was state-of-the-art for its day, however to our eyes it is a horribly dated. The quiet room where you would have a completely private conversation started to remind me of the 1970s TV series Get Smart. You half expected the Chief to walk through one of the doors or someone to start talking into their shoe. The only problem was that the Poms didn't get the TV series and consequently didn't get any of my jokes.

It was also interesting that there were only foreign tourists there.



Our last meal was actually in a private residence, this meant that we could take a hijabs off. The effect was amazing, everyone looked completely different. Except for the Shillary's we had only briefly seen each other without them. Pauline was virtually unrecognisable and even more amazing the Shillary's suddenly morphed into two completely separate people. I would have no difficulty telling them apart in these circumstances. Sheila and Patricia entertained us with a different version of the Eaton boating song detailing all our adventures (see Appendix 1).

¹⁴ Iranian graphic design is particularly good and throughout the country there were numerous examples with posters, road signs and graffiti. The embassy was another example of this handiwork

¹⁵ Remember the cold war was in full swing at the time

As we bade our final farewells to head off to the airport Nicholas sagely advised me not to crack any jokes between leaving the hotel and the plane lifting off as he didn't want me to be arrested for blasphemy. He later commented that he was quite surprised not to see me sitting in an office as he went through the airport several hours later.



¹⁶ Iran comprises a high plateau intersected with river gullies where most of the settlements are. I didn't do any bird watching as such but I didn't need to see a number of birds including the following

- Hooded Crow – including "swimming" in the fountains at Golestan Palace
- Eurasian Magpie – very different from the Australian version
- House Sparrow
- Barn Swallow
- Eurasian Sparrow Hawk
- Crested Lark
- Collared Dove
- White Eared Bulbul

Appendix 1

Glimpses of Iran 2017

To be sung to the tune of the Eton Boating Song

Jolly touring weather
Political nerds are we
Birds of a feather,
Led by the Woods and Farid,
And we'll all cross together
Through traffic approaching at speed,
But we're close to the end of our tether
With hijab and chador decreed.

Who else would go to Shahrekord
City of factories;
Pity we couldn't go see them
Thanks to the authorities!
But a singer, calligraphers, girl archers
Were thrills that we wouldn't have missed,
And then Christopher's words of wisdom
Made up for us not getting pissed.

Let's go and look for a village,
The headman will be there for sure,
He'll show us his almond tree tillage,
The clinic, the mosque and the fort;
Then it's Isfahan's See-oh-say bri-idge,
And twilight in Maidan Square,
Where we'll brush up our cultural image
'Neath the blue dome of Lotfallah.

Museums are not our agenda
Unless in Iran un-PC,
Like the wonderful music collection
Where they filmed US, not the players, for TV!
We slumped it in swanky Abbasi,
And gorged on the local fare,
Only stopping to stare in amazement
While strong men swung clubs in the air.

Everyone made us feel welcome
And asked how we liked Iran,
We loved it, but found it was no fun
Seeing schoolboys taught war slogans,
And thought posters maligning Obama
Were no help in winning them friends,
But we're told it's all mere melodrama
Which serves the regime's foreign ends.

Qom and Tehran, God and Mammon,
Not another mosque? Oh what a grump!
But the mullah smiled and said "Oh come on,
We've had DJ, now you've got Trump!"
Every day poor Farid was told No No,
No hospitals, schools or IT,

So hurrah for Nick, Karen and Christo-
-pher filling gaps brilliantly,
Though we're near to collapse we salute them
For our p'litical jamboree!