

Returning to Iran

Returning to Iran after so many years, I was oblivious of what lay ahead other than a long plain journey. I tried to reconcile myself by reminiscing from memories of my childhood, but all I could remember were vague recollections in place of memories.

Abruptly I awoke from my daydream with a stern methodical call of the tannoy to the departure lounge, and suddenly all my thoughts returned to the present. Would I get past customs? Will they accept my passport? If not, what then?

I knew that the Iranian government was suspicious of outsiders. My apprehensions proved unfounded as I waited, jostling, trying not to lose my place in the bustling queue. My baggage was checked although not as thoroughly as I expected from a country that bans alcohol, music, literature, videos and all things western, none of which I possessed, fortunately!

I staggered outside, somewhat stunned, into the bright sunlight of Iran. My mind was too occupied to pay attention to the many traders shouting, of weary children trying to attach themselves to my bags were all nothing but annoyances. Once I had managed to force my way into the first taxi I came across, I mistakenly thought that I had found sanctuary from the scrambling crowds, and took the opportunity to absorb the atmosphere.

The sky was a screaming blue but ahead of me the traffic around us moved in the same fashion as the people jostling at the airport, completely chaotically and without rules. Tehran “hot locality” in Farsi, is less a city than a sprawling slice of urban Iran with no centre, no focus, and is entirely endless. Tehran is a place of clambering crowds, bullying buses trying their damndest to manoeuvre in the lodged traffic that moves so slowly it can not be called dangerous.

Sitting in the taxi, I felt hot, bewildered and could feel my throat wheezing from the pollution which must be worst then any city I have been to. I pleaded to the taxi driver in an imploring fashion to stop at a nearby park. I stumbled across a patch of grass heading from the traffic. My surprise at what I saw was an indication of how narrow my perception of Iran had been. Surrounding me were families picnicking on the grass, men and women laughing together, couples strolled hand in hand, no one hurried. Fathers played with his young children, smiles were painted on almost every face that passed by. People were sleeping contemplatively on the grass. The air was completely one of ease. Prevailing upon everything was an overwhelming sense of peace.

I was disturbed that scenes of happiness and images of normal family life should surprise me so much. My own experiences were a sharp contrast to what I had been told to expect. Particularly concerning the increasing poverty and hardships of what some people in Iran consider to be living under an oppressive regime. This was not at all like the dark and feared place on the map known as Iran.

Although I was about to see the remnants of the darker days in Iran as soon as I left the refuge of the park. While above me the sky gradually filled with white as a storm gathered in the distance, neurotic gusts of wind plucked at the trees violently. I decided to scramble hastily onto the next bus and proceeded with my journey to my hometown of Isfahan.

The bus took us on a circuitous route that passed close to the Iraqi border. The stage for what they now call the Iraqi imposed war, ruined tanks dotted the countryside as we drove through the dessert. An air of loss and death hanged over the region. The dessert was sad and empty, steeped in their agony. In the border areas painted slogans still portrayed the tragedy. Roses, blood and doves decorated lonely walls.

A few hours later we reach Isfahan, the bus stops at the bazaar at the heart of the city long since closed. Shafts of moonlight shined through circular holes in the ceiling. I sensed I was in an another time, surrounded by sand-coloured stones. All the stores were closed and there were no relics of the modern age around us. It has the feeling of timelessness and history that belongs to Iran.

I walk on through the narrow corridors of the bazaar. Tired and exhausted I stumble into a teahouse. The walls are tiled and grimy. The floor is raw cement. Metal rods, lanterns and cups dangle from the walls. Old men sit quietly, smoked and drank tea. I gazed amongst the crowd and spotted some of the many tourists who had come to watch the eclipse. They were trying hard to get the locals to accept money for the food they had just eaten. I was bewitched by this, the most endearing of Iranian customs, that of refusing payment simply because they were guests.

The teahouse having answered my exhaustion, I leave the bazaar to walk the streets, which only a few hours ago had caused me so much anxiety. Attempting to adjust to the fact that the English alphabet has no longer any use, and I must read all the signs in Farsi, aiming to reconcile the thick dialect spoken here with my limited knowledge of the language.

It was getting dark. I was beginning to worry that I might not find my hotel amongst the maze of streets. Confused, with little money, a stranger passing asked if he could be of any assistance. He is a compact man with a fierce beard and teeth the colour of stale cheese. He shows me to a nearby taxi station. At first I found the intensity of his gaze, the complete disdain for all that he sees and his claims that Isfahan is a dangerous place for me on my own, somewhat unnerving. Very business like in his manner he pays for my ride to the other side of town, a hand shake, a brief wave, and he returns back the same way he came. Looking back I remember him as the angel of mercy with an angry glare.

Even though travelling to Iran presented many special difficulties, doing so has taught me several lessons. Firstly the golden rule of travelling to the area, which is, "expect the unexpected". It has also changed my attitude to life, in the context that not to take anything for granted. Since I have witnessed the misfortunes some people have to endure, that to this day defeat my powers of expression. The experience has also changed me as a person in terms of helping others when I can, especially when I come across a lost traveller. My stay in Isfahan was epitomised by the charity I received from strangers and generosity so outlandish that my first reaction was one of shameful suspicion, even at times tiring of the almost unbearable politeness, harangued by Iranian hospitality. The welcome I received in Isfahan I would expect from few cities in the world. Yet I craved indifference in the Iranian people and knew that this was ludicrous, that it was ungrateful to complain of beneficence. However, Isfahanies have a sour reputation with their fellow Iranians. Their countrymen have a saying that states, "the city would be perfect if there were no Isfahanies in it". It is a fitting conclusion to a town supposed to be the least hospitable in the country. If Isfahan is the least friendly city in Iran, I will have an interesting time ahead of me next time I visit Iran.