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Forging bridges

Members of Neighbors East and West traveled to Iran, and found the people generous, engaging.



Ruth Neff (far right) enjoys a meal of nuts, fruit and sweets with an Iranian family who invited several travelers to join their picnic in the small village of Abyaneh. Contributed photo by Sam Neff

By Ryan Gauthier
Staff Writer

While the former Soviet Union and Cuba don't sound like hot vacation destinations, Ruth Neff insists they are must-see locales.

The Richmond, Ind., resident helped found Neighbors East and West in 1986, a group focused on visiting countries the U.S. government has labeled as enemies.

"Over the years we realized that we just don't get all of the information about these places," Neff said. "I think it's important for people to travel to these countries and see what life is actually like there."

Members of NEW spent much of the '80s traveling to the Soviet Union, then switched gears to Cuba during the '90s. With another decade comes yet another country, this time nestled in the Middle East.

A pair of groups traveled to Iran in April, spending two weeks visiting the country and trying to forge bridges between Iranians and the U.S. during a somewhat tumultuous time period.

"When we came back from Iran everyone was telling us they were glad we made it back safely," Neff said. "It's such a false understanding of the country."

Oxford resident Frances McClure was among the second group of travelers, led by San Francisco-based Professor Jerry Dekker. She knew a lot about Iran prior to her journey, noting it served as an affirmation that "we're all just people trying to live our lives."

"Everyone I met during the trip was quite helpful and friendly," McClure said. "They like the U.S., but have issues with our government."

The most dangerous encounter McClure had during her lengthy stay?

Crossing busy streets.

"You had to just go for it and hope the cars would stop," she said. "We thankfully never had any problems, but it was a little intimidating."

Her group's trip included stays in Tehran and Esfahan, but also saw a select few visit the ancient Persian capital of Persepolis.

"We went to many museums, mosques and palaces, but the most wonderful part of the trip was the people," Neff said.

"Everywhere we went, there was someone eager to help us out."

Neff fondly recalled a baker who insisted on giving members of the group freshly-baked bread whenever they would near his shop, refusing to take their money in exchange.

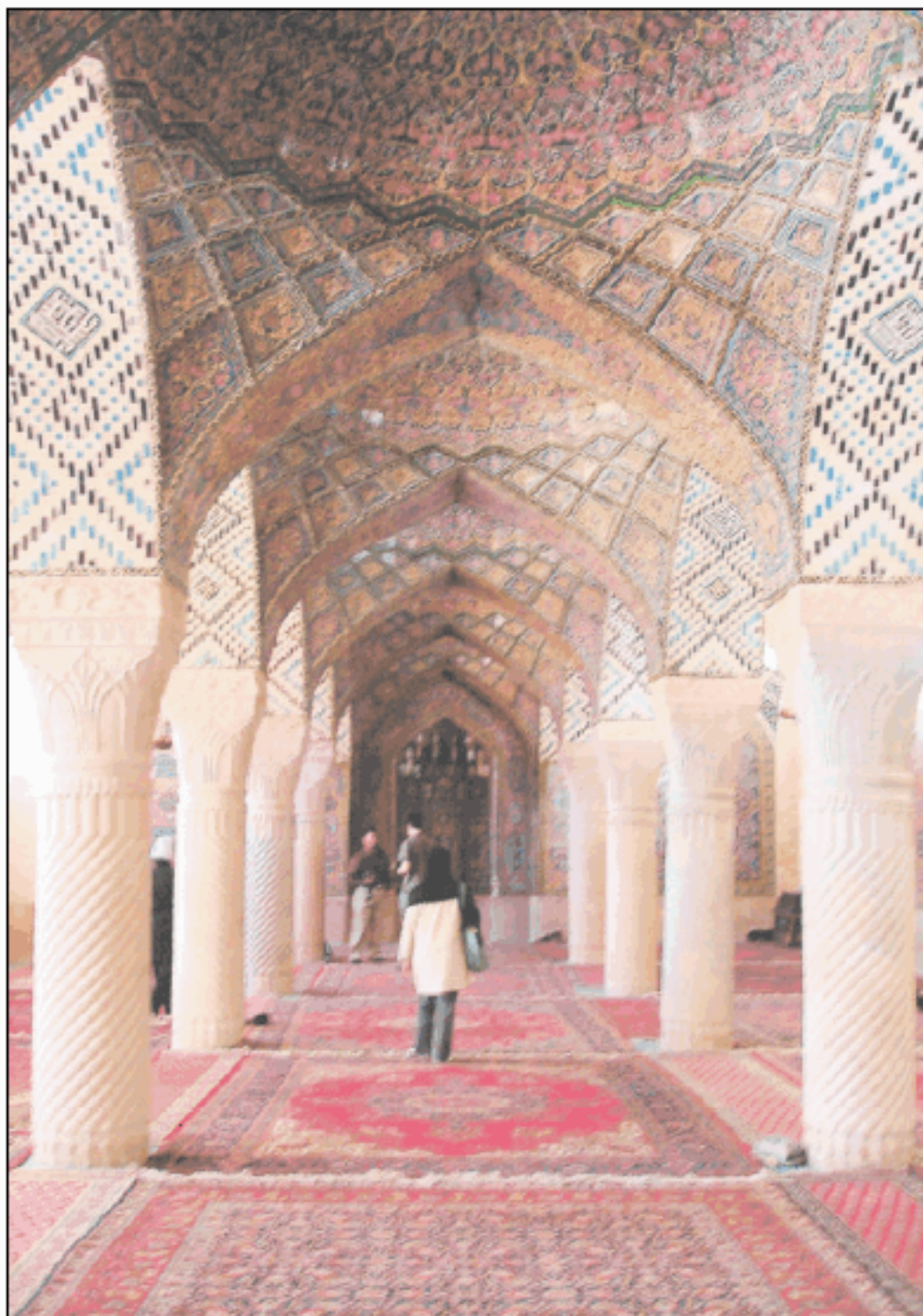
One particular couple spent four hours showing Neff and husband Sam areas of central Esfahan they had never seen, treating them to ice cream cones and fresh apricots along the way.

"We only asked them where the local post office was," she laughed. "People bent over backwards for us on multiple occasions."

The travelers carried pictures and letters from area children, distributing them to people they met during the trip. Neff said some of the children have already started to hear from Iranians, beginning what she calls an important international dialogue.

Though nothing has been scheduled at this point, Neff said she would be thrilled to organize another trip to Iran in the coming months.

She encouraged interested travelers to contact her at (765) 962-3922 for information about the organization.



Inside a small mosque in Shiraz dating to the 15th century, decorated with intricate mosaics of flowers and birds. Contributed photo by Frances McClure