

Note: I submitted this article (or ones like it to several newspapers, newsletters, in central Indiana. It was published in a few (some small, some small, some tiny) including the Richmond Palladium-Item, and the Wayne County Gadabout. It seemed difficult to get reporters and editors interested ... Sam

Neighbors East and West – This Time Iran

Since 1986 a Richmond Indiana organization called Neighbors East and West (NEW) has sponsored trips to countries which our government has labeled at enemies. In the eighties it was the Soviet Union, after that Cuba; a few days ago my wife, Ruth, and I returned with a NEW delegation of twenty people who had just completed a two-week visit to Iran.

The purpose of this trip was to encounter ordinary people in Iran on a personal basis, and attempt to forge bridges between the citizens of Iran and the USA at a time when the two governments are engaging in threats rather than negotiation.

To assemble this group NEW had to spread its nets widely. Iran is both distant and unknown, and the information available to Americans pictures that country as dangerous and hostile. Travel to Iran seems to take some courage, or perhaps just a better understanding of the nature of that country and its citizens.

The travelers came from Seattle, California, North Carolina, Indiana, and many parts in between. Of the twenty, six were Quakers, five were Unitarians, with other faiths represented as well. They ranged in age from 26 to 86.

As is usual in NEW excursions, participants found the personal contacts easy to attain and always rewarding, while government action often was complicating and hard to understand.

For Ruth and me, the trip included extended stays in Tehran and Esfahan, with brief visits to the cities of Qom and Kashan, and an overnight stay in the small village of Abyaneh. Others in our group also visited Shiraz, and the ancient Persian capitol of Persepolis. What follows is a brief description of our particular experiences.

We arrived at the Tehran airport at 2 am, as our third day of travel began. Our passports held visas which were barely dry, having arrived at our homes just two days earlier.



Our first and last stays were in Tehran, a huge, bustling city of more than twelve million at the foot of the Alborz Mountains. It is comparable to Los Angeles, with its heavy and chaotic traffic, accompanying smog, and its apparent lack of a civic plan. It does give the feeling of a modern city, with wide streets, an efficient

metro, and an atmosphere of organization.

Though the city could be confusing, we were helped many times by men (often in suits) and women (often in black) who would show us the way to the bank, or the metro, or the post office which would not otherwise have been able to find.

250 miles south of Tehran, in the midst of a brutal desert, we found the growing city of Kashan. We wound our way through half-built neighborhoods of apartment buildings, and then suddenly found ourselves in a beautiful garden of flowing water and fountains, built in the mid 19th century. Here we had our first encounters with Iranian high-school and university students: The boys wearing tee shirts and jeans, and the girls often in uniform with their heads covered. They were similar in their eagerness to meet us and to use their newly learned English. Always their first words to us were “Welcome to Iran!”



Our most elderly traveler, Al Inglis of Richmond, Indiana often would entertain on his e-flat harmonica. Another of our travelers, Bob Mullin of St. Paul, always had a Frisbee handy when the situation called for it.

We spent a night in the mountain village of Abyaneh, and most of a day investigating its tiny streets, wide enough for only one donkey at a time. Bob introduced Frisbee throwing to the eight students of the local elementary school, and left the disc as a present to the school; others sampled the hand crafts and dried fruit available in the shops along the way.



At noontime Ruth and I were walking through a small park a little ways from the village. We passed a family sitting comfortably on a carpet, laying out a picnic. When they saw us, they immediately invited us to join them, made room for us and offered us a variety of nuts, fruit and sweets. We had no choice but to (creakily) sit down with them, share what little we had and enjoy a conversation of

fractured English with a little Farsi added.

We traveled on to Esfahan, which is described by visitors as “Half the world”. On the outside Esfahan is a desert city with low buildings and dusty streets. On the inside it is a jewel. Its predominant feature is Naghsh-e Jahan Square, 500 meters by 300 meters, with the large Imam Mosque at one end and several remarkable buildings along the sides.



Joining all the buildings together are the arcades of the Bozorg Bazaar, containing the work of the finest Persian craftsmen.

Scattered here and there are shops containing the finest oriental carpets in the world, and probably the finest carpet salesmen as well.



But Esfahan is more than Imam square. Leading to the Zayenda River is the Chahar Bagh Abbasi Boulevard, a shopping and walking street unique for its beauty and business. The river itself is flanked by miles of carefully kept parks, and crossed by seven bridges, each an architectural masterpiece. Yet we found Esfahan to be more than parks, magnificent buildings and interesting shops.

We found the people we met even more special. We can think back with pleasure of the evening we asked about finding a post office, and as a result a young married couple took time out of their day to give us a full tour of the parts of central Esfahan which we had not seen. We can think about the baker who gave us freshly baked bread whenever we passed his shop, and when we tried to pay for it he gave us back more in change than we had given him. And we can remember the young man who took me all over Tehran to show me a Santur – the ancient ancestor of the Hammered Dulcimer. When we crossed the street he would guide me carefully and always position himself to block oncoming traffic.



We returned to Tehran for our last three days, and managed to become comfortable with the metro and with the unwritten rules which govern traffic. We were able to make even more new friends, and were invited into two different homes for a meal or afternoon tea. We were given a tour of one of Tehran's Universities, and we visited an American couple, former Indiana residents, who were finishing a year of study in Iran.

We were regularly recognized as tourists, and when Iranians found out our nationality they became interested, excited and hospitable, all at once. For us it was one of the few times as travelers when we have been happy rather than embarrassed to have been identified as American Tourists.

When we returned to the United States we were amazed to encounter very strong negative attitudes toward Iran at all levels, promoted by a remarkable ignorance of the country. Iran seems to be some sort of threat to us – our natural enemy, about which presidential candidates use words like “Bomb, Bomb Bomb” or “Obliterate”.

Not only does it make no sense to us, it also hurts us deeply that the friendly and decent people who were so helpful to us can be so easily categorized as our collective enemy. We are hoping that other Americans can travel to Iran and experience it first-hand. Perhaps we can together recognize that beautiful lives are more valuable than political expediency.