

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Posted on Sun, Jun. 05, 2005

No Westerners allowed

By Nicholas Schmidle
TIMES CORRESPONDENT

I STOOD near the road in front of Tehran University, waiting for my ride to the holy city of Qom.

A handful of Iranian students -- my schoolmates -- had gathered around, teasing me about wanting to visit the city disparaged by many Iranians for its salty, sickening drinking water and its overabundance of Muslim clerics.

When my friend's two-door Peugeot finally pulled up and Dr. Abid stepped out to greet me in his gray clerical robes and white turban, I turned to catch the incredulous expressions on the students' faces. I was heading to Qom riding shotgun with a Muslim cleric, a mullah.

I was on a personal quest. Having lived for two months in the Islamic Republic while studying Persian at Tehran University's International Center for Persian Studies, I was anxious to see the country's religious side -- a side only faintly visible in Tehran. Here in Tehran clerics are ridiculed almost wholesale. Cities and universities are filled with secular Iranians who have long grown tired of the mullahs and their rigid interpretation of Islam. Defiantly bright headscarves can be seen slipping and sliding off women's heads in the hip neighborhoods of Northern Tehran. The prayer room in my Tehran University dormitory doubled as a TV room. The TV was rarely off. Only once did I see anyone praying.

Divided society

"Why do you want to talk to these (religious) people?" a teacher at Tehran University asked me when I mentioned my upcoming trip to Qom. "They are all stupid."

Today in Iran, 25 years after the Islamic Revolution upended a secular, Western-leaning monarchy to establish a government ruled by Shia Muslim clerics, the pendulum is swinging. Today, even the Persian word for mullah, akhund, has become vulgar to some. The swing can be explained partly by a population dominated by youth; well more than half of the country's population was born after the revolution in 1979. Many wish to live a lifestyle like the one their parents lived 30 years ago -- wearing jeans, going to Western movies and seeking a secular life.

When current president Mohammad Khatami was elected in 1997, some Iranians thought he was the man to change all that. But two terms later, he has proved ineffective at breaking the religious hardliners' grip. On June 17, Iranians will have another chance to pick their president when they vote for the sixth president of the Islamic Republic.

In spite of the secular lifestyle I usually observed in Tehran, I was periodically reminded that I was, after all, living in the Islamic Republic.

For all the conversations I had with students and middle-class Iranians while watching state-banned satellite television and listening to tirades against the government, I also sat in scores of restaurants and living rooms displaying photographs of Ayatollah Khomeini and paintings of Imam Ali, who, according to Shi'ites, was the rightful successor to the Prophet Mohammad after his death.

Seeking another view

Determined to get beyond the framed photos and to finally discover Iran's touted religious fervor, I left Tehran that clear-skied afternoon in the passenger seat of Dr. Abid's Peugeot. I embarked on the first leg of my pilgrimage to see Iran's holiest sites, a pilgrimage that would ultimately take me to Qom, Shiraz and Mashhad, the greatest of the Islamic Republic's sacred cities.

My journey was uncertain -- Iran's shrines are off-limits to non-Muslims. Westerners are generally not allowed in the door.

When we pulled into the center of Qom around 10 p.m., it was dark, dusty and humid. The streets and sidewalks were crawling with clerics -- some on foot, some on motorcycles, some carrying melons and bread. We cruised the boulevard that Khomeini had marched down with his students before his exile in 1963, and then again in 1979, when he celebrated the victory of the Islamic Revolution.

Qom's abundant clerics and seminarians flock to be near Hazrat-e Masumeh, the shrine of Fatimeh, sister of Imam Reza. Imam Reza, according to Shi'ites, was the eighth Imam after the Prophet Mohammad's death. Shia lore depicts Reza's tragic martyrdom in 818 A.D., when he was poisoned by a henchman of the corrupt leader, Caliph Ma'mun. Adherents to Shia Islam believe that the 12 descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, beginning with Ali, were the proper political and spiritual leaders, or Imams, after the Prophet's death. The Shi'ites, or "party of Ali," enshrine the burial places of the 11 fallen Imams and their families. (Shia theology holds that the 12th Imam disappeared in his youth, to reappear when the world teems with ruling tyrants and false prophets.)

The morning after we arrived, Dr. Abid and I packed off to Hazrat-e Masumeh. In tow behind the mullah, I handed over my shoes for a numbered ticket and walked through two security points before we were beneath the blue, arching ceilings of the mosque. I had made it -- I was in the mosque.

Inside, an active hum like radio static grew louder as we walked past room after room of praying men. In the next hall, several hundred people crowded near Fatimeh's shrine. The shrine itself sat like a golden zamboni, square in the middle of a giant, vaulted chamber. Crowds of men as many as eight deep were herded clockwise by guards waving long poles. Young children crawled over others' heads as they tried to reach out to the shrine, held at their ankles by their fathers and brothers. Grown men lunged toward the gold latticework. Sweet incense drifted aimlessly through the air. Above the shrine, the ceiling burst into a frenzied mosaic of tiny, infinitely numbered pieces of mirror. The religious fervor reminded me of scenes on the Televangelists Network.

The old and the new

My pilgrimage continued in Shiraz -- an all-night bus ride from Tehran.

While Tehran is more cosmopolitan, more crowded, and parts of it more overtly secular than any other place in Iran, Shiraz remains the heart of ancient Persia and the cradle of Persian indulgence. Shiraz's eponymous grape is outlawed by the government, much to the chagrin of its artsy, rosewater-sipping citizens. Its most renowned tourist sites are either pre-Islamic, like the ancient ruins at Persepolis, or non-Islamic, like the tombs of the poets Sa'di and Hafez, whose verse celebrates wine-drinking and reckless love.

But Shiraz also hosts Bogh-e Shah-e Cheragh, or the Mausoleum of the King of the Lamp, a grand mosque sitting toward the end of the bazaar's many tentacles. It is also the resting place of Imam Reza's brother Mir Ahmad.

Mahram, my host in Shiraz, was a thin, stylish fellow who looked more like an Italian teenager than a 30-year-old Iranian. When I asked him the best time to see Mir Ahmad's shrine, he sighed at me and rolled his eyes. Clearly, he preferred showing off Shiraz's teahouses and famed gardens instead of its mosques.

We entered Bogh-e Shah-e Cheragh a little after midnight -- this time my guide and the late-night hour probably were the reason I was able to enter. I quickly sought a cubby in which to leave my shoes and then sought the room holding the shrine.

The scene here was tame compared to the catapulting children and thick incense I had seen in Qom. But in another room, roughly two dozen young men, most of them wearing all black, stood in a circle chanting and beating on their upper chests. "Hussein! Hussein!" they repeated while one man recited the myth of Karbala, where Hussein, the fourth Imam, was martyred in 680 A.D. Each of the men pounded a tight fist against his shoulder to punctuate Hussein's suffering, to relive Hussein's martyrdom. "Hussein! Hussein!" throbbed throughout the otherwise empty mosque as they worked themselves into a growing trance. "Hussein! Hussein!"

I watched, fascinated, before my guide Mahram finally pulled at my elbow and leaned his head toward the door. All this religious stuff was really not his thing.

The grand finale

I stood in the hot, dirty streets of Mashhad, a pilgrimage site that swells to more than 4 million during the pilgrimage season. I stared over the low city roofs at the golden silhouettes of Astan-e Qods-e Razavi -- the brilliant complex housing the remains of Imam Reza.

Mashhad was the climax of my pilgrimage. I had already seen the shrine of Imam Reza's sister, his brother, and an hour

outside of Mashhad, even a mausoleum featuring Reza's footprints.

But Astan-e Qods-e Razavi was notorious for refusing entrance to non-Muslims.

One couple who had tried to visit addressed this in the guidebook "Lonely Planet: Iran." "I think many travelers will feel like we did, that having arrived at 'the Vatican,' we weren't able to see the 'Sistine Chapel,'" they wrote. Determined to gain access to the last holy site of my pilgrimage by "blending in" as much as possible, I saved my darkest pants and shirt to wear inside, though my blond hair and 6-foot frame belied any inconspicuousness.

Three friends and I left our hotel at 3 a.m. and headed toward the shrine. With the exception of the nut and dried fruit shop we had patronized earlier that day, every store on the strip remained open. The sidewalks were blasted with floodlights shining on vendors and their wares.

Business, like religiosity, never dries up near the shrine.

Inside the walled complex, courtyards, some the size of 10 football fields, connected to other courtyards through tight hallways. We sat on the edge of a fountain near the main entrance of the shrine, devising a game plan to get inside. To deflect attention from ourselves, we split and went in separately. I scooted over to the shoe-tender, traded my shoes for a numbered coin, and continued inside.

Much to my amazement, I wasn't stopped -- perhaps due to the late hour, perhaps because the mosque was too busy. Even at 4 a.m., the mosque was packed with people.

The rumblings of praying men rolled forth. I walked through several vast chambers before the hum of religious fervor spilled out in the form of exhausted and dazed pilgrims.

Inside the room holding the shrine, mosaic mirrors on the walls and ceiling swirled a frantic energy. Women standing opposite a tall glass partition cried hysterically. Their arms reached forward to touch the golden edges of the shrine, were yanked and pulled closer to the lattice by women up front. The screams were dizzying. Near the shrine was something of a Shia mosh pit. People pushed and shoved and elbowed their way closer.

I saw a seam at the corner and reached to hold a link on the lattice. All pilgrims seek a vision of clarity. After three shrines and more than 2,000 miles on my pilgrimage, I held mine.

Back in Qom

Less than a week before my flight back to Washington, D.C., I returned to Qom to conduct interviews with a few senior clerics. I wanted to further my observations of Iran's own red state-blue state dichotomy, that between the secular streets of Tehran and the reigning religiosity in Qom.

Yet this characterization of Iranian life doesn't do justice to the complexity of the situation there. Many Iranians, in Tehran and Qom alike -- including some high-ranking clerics -- are quite critical of the government. But as I learned from my friend and translator Afshin, some are able to separate religion and politics more than the regime might like. Afshin griped endlessly about the government, but also knew his way around a mosque and revered the shrines in Iran's holy cities.

When Afshin and I arrived in Qom that day an hour early for the interview, we headed over to Hazrat-e Masumeh to kill some time.

As we neared the domed center of the complex, a man on a stool, holding a fluffy duster, tapped Afshin on the back. "Foreigner," the guard said, pointing at me with his duster and shaking his head. Every good pilgrimage must come to an end. With that fluffy, waving duster, I knew that mine was over.

Nicholas Schmidle is a graduate student at American University and a freelance journalist. He lived in Iran during the summer of 2004, where he studied Persian at Tehran University.

