

UNDER WESTERN EYES



Jsmerkle is the penname of an American tourist who has visited Iran in April 2009. The following is the story of her stay in Iran.

Incredible experience

(Part 1)
By Jsmerkle

Well, I made it, but my arrival at the Tehran airport was very interesting. The immigration officer looked at my passport, looked up at me and smiled. After 45 minutes, I was let through.

Tehran has been pretty quiet since this is their big New Year holiday and everyone is either traveling or home with family and friends, so there aren't too many people out on the streets.

Kate, my friend from Seattle who is joining me for this portion of the trip, and I have been able to check out various museums and palaces and had the places to ourselves.

Our guide has also taken us to some traditional restaurants, which have been delicious, but I have a feeling that I won't need to eat lamb kabobs for a long time once we get back since that seems to be the special dish on every menu.

Today we went to see Iran's national carpet museum and it was very impressive. An unbelievable selection of beautiful carpets, some very old, and lots of explanation of how to recognize carpets from different regions.

It will be hard to resist not bringing something home to hang on the wall as a souvenir.

The coat and scarf stay on in public at all times. Also we can't seem to figure out how the locals keep their head scarves in place but a quick trip to a corner store resulted in bobby pins and clips which seem to be doing the job.

We've had some very interesting conversations with our tour guide in Tehran. When he picked me up at the airport, I had planned to keep the conversation light and focus on the weather, places we were going to be seeing, etc.



The Golestan palace

Right away, he launched into a conversation about how Iran is a peaceful country and only wants to build nuclear plants to generate power.

But the most interesting was his insistence that they really do have a free country - it's just that they have chosen to accept a "different kind of freedom."

Tomorrow we're up early to catch an 8:30 am flight to Shiraz, which is about an hour flight south from Tehran and we'll be met by a different guide there.

Shiraz is a city known for arts and culture and home to some of Iran's famous poets. We've been told that during the New Year a lot of locals visit places like Shiraz, so we're expecting it to be quite a different experience from Tehran and will have no shortage of opportunities to meet and talk to the locals.

Shiraz was about a 1-1/2 hour plane ride south of Tehran. Shiraz is a university town and the people have a reputation for being some of the friendliest in Iran, which is an understatement.

At almost every place we've gone, we've had people approach us to ask where we're from, and then when they find out we're Americans they all want to talk to us and have their picture taken with us. Very entertaining.

Our guide in Shiraz is a very nice man in his early 60's named Abbas who was a flight engineer with the Iranian Air Force and is now retired.

The only problem is that he's a history buff which is great in small doses, but after a while the history lecture starts to wear thin especially when it's compounded by Persian pride.

He seems to be on a mission to make sure every foreigner he comes in contact with understands that a) Iranians are Persians, not Arabs, and b) The Persian Empire was the greatest empire that ever existed.

Yesterday we had a great day at the bazaar since Kate has a friend back home whose brother owns a carpet store that has been in their family for 70 years.

Yes, you know where this is going. He showed us all around the bazaar, and then we must have spent a few hours at his store in the bazaar drinking tea while he explained the intricacies of carpet weaving and design.

It was good to have a connection since he gave us a great deal on carpets, so now the only trick is to make sure we can get them home past US customs - keep your fingers crossed.

We also spent a day in nomad country, about a 3-hour drive from Shiraz.

There is a small population of nomads in Iran that continue to live the lifestyle they've had for hundreds if not thousands of years.

They tend sheep, live in tents, and migrate twice a year to warmer/cooler climates based on the season.

(Source: Tourists' personal blog)

(To be Contd.)

Aging mound, cradle of civilization



A long shot of the "Tape Sialk."

Compiled by our staff writers

Located at the edge of the central desert of Iran, "Tape Sialk" (In Persian, Tappe means "hill" or "mound") is a large ancient archeological structure lying on a hill. It is claimed to be the world's oldest ziggurat, dating back to the third millennium BC, tucked away in the suburbs of the city of Kashan, in central Iran, close to Fin Garden.

Upon visiting the oldest ziggurat in the world, one is only greeted with the solitary sound of dusty wind gusts. Here, near Kashan, sits the 7,500-year-old ziggurat of Sialk, a testament to ancient civilizations that flourished in Iran long before the Egyptian or Greek cultures blossomed. Like many other ruins in Iran, unfortunately, what is left of this ancient edifice is only a big pile of crumbling bricks.

The Sialk ziggurat has three platforms, and was built ca. 2900 BC. However, the earliest archeological remains of the north mound date back to the middle of the sixth millennium BC; i.e. about 7,500 years ago.

A joint study between Iran's Cultural Heritage Organization, The Louvre, and Institute Francais de Recherche en Iran also verifies the oldest settlements in Sialk to date back to 5500-6000 BC.

Sialk is one of four ziggurats built by the Elamite civilization. The other three are Chogha Zanbil (1250 BC), the Susa ziggurat (1800 BC), and Haft Tappe (1375 BC), all in Khuzestan. Sialk is the 32nd and most recent ziggurat to be discovered.

What remains of this 5000-year-old ziggurat is not in a favorable condition like many other ancient ruins in Iran. At the site, there are actually two structures (necropoli) at Sialk situated several hundred feet from each other.

The three platforms of the larger ziggurat however still remain in place. Not much remains of the smaller structure. The Louvre has also excavated a cemetery near the structures that have been dated as far back as 7,500 years.

What little is left of the two crumbling Sialk ziggurats is now threatened by the encroaching suburbs of the expanding city of Kashan. It is not uncommon to see kids playing soccer amid the ruins, while only several meters away lie the supposedly "off limit" 5,500-year-old skeletons unearthed at the foot of the ziggurat. The site still remains to be registered as a World Heritage Site at UNESCO for protection.

The first round of excavation was carried out some 70 years ago by the great French archeologist Roman Girsh-

man and new studies have led to the identification of the social, economical, political, and governmental systems of different historical periods.

However, similar to the thousands of other Iranian historical ruins, the treasures excavated here eventually found their way to museums such as The Louvre, The British Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and private collectors.



Sialk, and the entire area around it, is thought to have first originated as a result of the pristine large water sources nearby that still run today. The Cheshmeh ye Soleiman (or "Solomon's Spring") has been bringing water to this area from nearby mountains for thousands of years.

The Fin garden, built to its present form in the 1600s is a popular tourist attraction today. It is here where Persian Kings of the Safavid dynasty would spend their vacations away from their capital cities. It is also here where, Piruz, the Iranian assassin of Islam's second Caliph is buried. All these remains are located in the same location where Sialk is.

Iranian archeologists plan to identify the food basket and diet of the people who lived in the historical site of Sialk over 7,000 years ago.

Sialk is considered one of most important and archeologically rich areas in Iran and experts have already discovered artifacts dating from the fifth to first millennium B.C. there. They have also found out one of the oldest ziggurats of the world in this civilization basin.



Archeologists have already concluded that residents of Sialk had red and white meat as the main source of their nutritious protein, but now they want to find out which kind of meat was prevalent in their diet.

The animal bones discovered in the area are of various farm and wild animals such as cow, sheep, goat, gazelle, and ram, explained head of the archeological studies of the site, he said.

The abundance of the bones of farm animals (cow, sheep and goat) in comparison to those of gazelle and ram shows that the residents consumed meat of farm animals as the main source of protein, and hunted occasionally.

Experts believe that Sialk dwellers had been making all of their tools and instruments by stone, but little by little, they had started to use metal for making their implements. The artistic taste of these people has been found through the engraving on bones which had been carried out for the first time and through the designs on their pottery.



POEM

A fine lonely night

By Sohrab Sepehri

Listen! The furthest bird of the world sings
The night is neat, straight, and wide, the moon whispers
To the ears of the flowers and twigs.
In front of the stairs
Within the abundance of the breeze
A torch in my hand, I stand.
The lanes is calling your steps
Wash your eyes, wear your shoes and come.
Come until the moon's nightly finger warns.
Come until the night's scent absorbs the mass of your limbs.
Listen! I know, There will be a wise
Who will tell you then:
"The best instant is the night, you look into your eyes
And they are wet, wet from the love."

Sohrab Sepehri (1928 -1980) was a notable modern Persian poet. He was born in Kashan in Isfahan province. He is considered one of the five most famous modern Persian (Iranian) poets who have practiced "New Poetry" (a kind of poetry that often has neither meter nor rhyme).

His poetry is full of humanity and concern for human values. He loved nature and refers to it frequently.



HISTORICAL BATTLES

Battle of Leipzig

Compiled by our staff writer

Battle of Leipzig or Battle of the Nations, fought on 16-19 October 1813, was one of the most decisive defeats suffered by Napoleon Bonaparte.

The battle was fought on German soil and involved German troops on both sides, as a large proportion of Napoleon's troops actually came from the German Confederation of the Rhine.

The battle involved over 600,000 soldiers, making it the largest battle in Europe prior to World War I.

Knocked back on his heels, Napoleon returned to France, while the Allies kept their momentum, invading France early the next year. Napoleon was forced to abdicate, and was exiled to Elba that spring.

Following Napoleon's disastrous campaign in Russia and his defeats in the Peninsular War, the anti-French forces had cautiously regrouped as the Sixth Coalition, comprising Russia, Austria, Prussia, Sweden, Britain, Spain, Portugal and certain smaller German states.

In total, the Coalition could put into the field well over a million troops—indeed by the time of Leipzig, total Allied armies east of the Rhine probably exceeded a million. By contrast, Napoleon's forces had shrunk to just a few hundred thousand.



CELEBRITY

Motamed, rising world-class taekwondo athlete

Khashayar Parvaneh & Mohammad Amin Mokarrami

Mohammad Bagheri Motamed (born in 1985, Tehran) is an outstanding talented Iranian taekwondo athlete who specializes in sparring. There are three types of taekwondo competitions: patterns (harmonious movements), breaking (of hard objects), and sparring (two men combat).

He snatched the gold medal in the men's 68 kg (featherweight class), at the 2009 Taekwondo World Championships in Copenhagen, breaking a four-year spell on the national team.

Motamed is gifted with all the factors necessary for being a champion including high technical ability, physical fitness, strength, stamina, agility, speed, intelligence, and perseverance.

His brilliant performance dazzled all the sports analysts present at the event and all envisioned a brilliant future for his blossoming career.

"My medal is the result of coaches' trust in the youth like me; I trained hard for nine months and it yielded," he enthused.



Before the event he, along with his coach Reza Mehandust, watched and analyzed the films of all archrivals' matches.

In Denmark, he beat Venezuelan, Chinese, and American opponents coasting to the semifinals. In the semifinal, he faced the tough Turkish bronze-winner at Beijing Olympic Games.

Having outperformed the Turkish athlete, he made it into finals, where he thrashed stunningly the Mexican opponent in a thrilling battle and grabbed the coveted gold medal.

The Iranian team, composed of eight players, came second in the championship for the fifth time reinforcing itself as a world taekwondo powerhouse.

Motamed believes that South Koreans, who came first, seized the championship resorting to their influence in the World Taekwondo Federation and utilizing unfair decisions made by biased referees.

"But the important point is that Iran's young team proved that we can trust the youth," he said.

Out of eight athletes sent to Denmark, seven attended the world championship for the first time.

"In this year's competitions, all teams had made significant progress, the first and final stages didn't differ much (in terms of competitiveness)," he said.

He first joined the Iranian national team at the age of 15, and since then has starred in all age groups.

Motamed believes that Mehandust is a matchless taekwondo coach, "from the first time I was called up to the national team at the age of 15, I have continued my training under his supervision."

He attributes the success of the national team and himself to the conscientious efforts made by the head coach and the regular well-organized training sessions designed by him.

The twenty-four year old athlete is considered a great asset to the national team. Iranians hope to see him winning gold medal in the 2012 London Olympic Games.